

Harry Potter and the Ties that Bind

by The Engulfing Silence

The death of their friend has left scars on everyone. While Harry's friends pull together as a group, the young man responsible for bringing them together has descended into darkness and begins following a path that he had thought he'd left behind. Sequel to Harry Potter and the Heir of Slytherin.

Rated: Fiction M - English - Drama/Romance - Harry P., Susan B., Daphne G., Amelia B. - Chapters: 23 - Words: 207,236 - Reviews: 1,558 - Favs: 3,624 - Follows: 3,833 - Updated: 10/15/2016 - Published: 12/21/2014 - Status: Complete - id: 10905633

URL: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/10905633>

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Missing

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Chapter 1: Missing

Albus Dumbledore was tired. Exhausted. School had ended but the problems that had arisen from the past year hadn't. They piled up, higher and higher, problems compounding upon problems. It was getting so bad that Dumbledore rarely got any sleep these days. He must have stayed up at least three nights this past week.

His problems all started with the opening of the Chamber of Secrets. Dumbledore, much like young Harry, had not believed the chamber to have truly been opened. His reasoning differed from the young Potter heir's, however.

After the incident that took place in Harry Potter's first year, Dumbledore had gone to great lengths to ensure Voldemort would not be able to pass through the wards, even if he used the magic signature of another to mask his own presence. So, he knew for a fact that the dark lord had not been at school this last year.

Voldemort was the only one who could open the Chamber of Secrets, to the best of Dumbledore's knowledge. There were no other heirs of Slytherin out there. Certainly none of his current students were capable of tracing their lineage back to Salazar. From the many hours he'd spent researching the chamber, Dumbledore came to the conclusion that only an heir to Slytherin, someone with Salazar's blood flowing through their veins could have opened the chamber. Without anyone meeting that criteria at Hogwarts, he had come to the conclusion that the chamber had not been opened and someone was using scare tactics to terrorize the students, though for what purpose remained unknown. Harry Potter's insight only confirmed what he'd already suspected.

Unfortunately, they had both been wrong. He didn't know how, but somehow, the Chamber of Secrets had indeed been opened. The situation had quickly devolved after this discovery had been made near the end of last year when Miss Granger had been killed and Miss Weasley taken into the chamber itself. Even now, he was still at a loss on how to explain what happened. The only clue he had was something young Ginerva Weasley had told him.

"I... I had a diary. I found it in my book bag after our family went shopping at Flourish and Blotts. It, well, I-I wrote in it and it wrote back. The words they—it was like they just appeared on the page. The diary spoke to me. He—it called itself Tom, and he was so understanding and kind that I—well, he became like my best friend. And so I wrote in the diary all summer and into the school year. I didn't think there was anything wrong it, but over time I began blacking out. I'd be in my bedroom writing and the next minute I'd be wandering the halls. This one time I-I woke up with b-b-blood all over me and I couldn't remember—I didn't know how it happened! It kept getting worse and worse! I thought I was going mad and I—everything just became hazy after that. I tried throwing the diary away, because I thought it had something to do with this but—but—"

Miss Weasley had become incoherent after that, but it had given him something to go on. The diary. Tom. Voldemort. The diary must have been something of Voldemort's, an enchanted diary that could unlock the Chamber of Secrets without his presence. Dumbledore hadn't missed the irony of that. He had been so sure that Harry was right, that he was right, that *they* were right in thinking that the Chamber of Secrets was simply being used as a mask for someone to use a powerful dark artifact in order to terrorize the school.

In a way, they *were* right. Someone had used a dark artifact to terrorize the school. It just wasn't in the way they thought.

Hermione Granger's death and the opening of the chamber caused him a lot of problems and even more heartache, but then an even bigger problem had arrived on his doorstep. Harry Potter had gone missing. Minerva had been the first to notice that Harry was no longer in the castle. They had checked anyway, just to be on the safe side. It would not be hard for him to find a place to secrete himself, isolate himself from

everyone else. Hogwarts was large, the grounds more so. It didn't matter in the end, Harry hadn't been found anywhere. Not in the castle. Not on the grounds. It was as if he'd disappeared.

That's when Dumbledore began to worry.

That worry only increased when he sent Severus to check up on the Dursley's. If Harry wasn't in the castle, logic dictated that he would be at his relatives. That had been his assumption, at least.

It turned out that Harry had been at the Dursley's residence, or someone had been there at some point in time. Severus had come back and told him that the Dursleys, all three of them, had their minds wiped clean of Harry Potter. Even Petunia Dursley. What's more, whoever had done the mind wipe had been thorough. Petunia remembered everything about the magical world. She remembered her sister, she remembered Severus, she remembered James Potter. However, she did not remember that James Potter and Lily Potter nee Evans had a son, or that their son had lived with her for around 12 years now. It was as if Harry Potter had vanished from the mind's of Petunia, Vernon and Dudley. None of them ever remembered a Harry James Potter.

Slumping in his chair, the aging headmaster took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. They were getting sore. His vision, much like everything else, wasn't what it used to be.

A trill to his left made the old man look up. He gave a tired smile to Fawkes, his brilliant and beautiful Phoenix familiar. The ancient and powerful firebird sat upon his perch, staring at him with intelligent eyes. He trilled some more and images flooded Dumbledore's mind.

"Yes, I am fine, Fawkes. There is no need to worry."

Fawkes trilled again. This time he looked reproachful. Dumbledore grimaced.

"Yes, I suppose I am not being entirely truthful." Dumbledore's smile was just a tad bitter. "You always could see right through me, couldn't you, old friend?" The aging headmaster leaned back in his chair, his body weary and aching. How long had he been sitting here? Ten hours? Twelve?

A series of trills that sounded more like music than any known language came from Fawke's beak. Images filled Dumbledore's mind and a warmth spread through his chest, allowing the negative emotions fraying at the edges of his weary mind to be beaten back, if only temporarily.

"Thank you, Fawkes."

More trilling.

The wards flaring to life within his mind caused Dumbledore to snap out of his reverie. He straightened his posture and tried to present a strong image. It wouldn't do if those on the other side of the door knew how tired he felt.

"Come in, Minerva, Amelia."

There was a pause at the door before it opened. Minerva walked in, followed by Amelia. They moved over to stand in front of his desk.

"One day, Dumbledore, I am going to find out how you managed to know when someone is at your door and who it is."

Dumbledore gave Minerva a congenial smile. "Perhaps one day you shall find out, but not today, I'm afraid." His expression turning hopeful along with his mind, the headmaster turned to Amelia. "If you are here, does that mean you've found a lead on Harry's whereabouts?"

"I am afraid not." Dumbledore slumped. "I am here on other business."

"I see." He tried not to sigh. "In that case, I believe I should ask whether you are here as Amelia Bones or acting as the head of the DMLE?"

"I suppose you could say it's a bit of both," Amelia admitted. "Things are getting bad, Dumbledore. Have you read this morning's Daily Prophet?"

Dumbledore grimaced, his eyes instinctively flickering to a newspaper hidden underneath several documents. "I have."

"The public is going mad. Harry Potter missing? Everyone is frantic. People are demanding that we find him. The Minister's office, the DMLE,

even the Department of International Cooperation has been flooded with letters." Amelia stared at Dumbledore, looking just as tired as he felt. "Things are getting out of hand."

"I am aware of that."

Dumbledore felt the ache in his bones return. With it came the regret, the second guessing. He should have been more attentive to what was happening in his school. He should have done more when the chamber had been opened. He could have avoided this disaster if he'd just been more thorough in his investigation.

Why was it that whenever a problem came around, he was useless to solve it? How much more failure would he have to shoulder? Hadn't his failure to stop his sister from dying, his best friend from falling, his inability to mend the wounds brother been enough? When would all this end?

"Dumbledore?"

"Yes, yes, I am here." Dumbledore waved a hand in the air. "I wish I could help you. I've currently got Severus, Filius and Hagrid searching for him in the mundane world. I have also asked everyone I know to keep an eye out for him and report to me should they see him." Dumbledore didn't mention that if Harry really was responsible for wiping out his relatives memories, chances were good no one would find him unless he wanted to be found.

Amelia frowned and raised an eyebrow at the same time. "Why the non-magical world?"

"Because if Harry was going to hide anywhere, it would be where nobody is searching for him," Dumbledore declared. "Harry Potter is a very logically thinking child. He knows that, beyond a few wizards trained specifically for the task of interacting with muggles, very few know how the mundane world works."

"The mundane world?" Amelia raised an eyebrow. "I see you have been talking to Mr. Potter before he... vanished."

"Yes." Dumbledore felt his mouth quirk into a sad smile. "I did indeed. He is an incredibly bright young man. His thoughts, beliefs and ideals are all well-thought out." He looked down at his desk. "Now he's gone and it appears that all of the work he put in, all the inroads he made in spite of his young age, may very well crumble. Without him present, I fear people like Lucius Malfoy and Endymion Nott will use his absence as proof that he is too young for his station."

"Do you really think they'd be capable of that?" Amelia seemed skeptical.

"If Harry isn't found before the start of the new year, they will likely claim that he cracked under pressure and ran from his duties."

Dumbledore felt shame return full force. All of this was his fault. As the headmaster, it was his duty to protect the children within these hallowed halls and keep them safe. Yet twice now Harry Potter and his friends had been put in danger. Twice now Harry had been the one to solve what should have been his problem. And this time, it had cost Harry a very dear friend. What kind of headmaster was he to let a student do what he and the staff should have done all along?

"We won't let that happen." Amelia's voice snapped him out of his funk. He looked up to see the woman standing before him, her eyes blazing in a way he'd not seen since the war. "We won't let that happen," she repeated. "Myself and the Dowager Longbottom will not let that happen. We'll run interference until Mr. Potter can be found." A grimace crossed her face. "I'm sure even Celestina will agree to help, though the Augusta may be adverse to working with her."

Dumbledore felt a small smile cross his face. His spirit, troubled and weathered, lifted, if only a bit. It seemed as if Harry Potter had made some strong allies. He knew he had no right to, but he couldn't help but feel proud of the young man.

Now if only they could find out where he'd hidden himself.

XoX

Susan Bones sat in her room. Right leg resting against the window sill, left leg dangling off the edge, she thought about all that had happened

this last year; Harry's scary behavior toward Draco on the train; the many things she'd learned at school; the opening of the Chamber of Secrets. More than anything else, she thought about the loss of her two friends.

Hermione Granger was dead and Harry Potter was missing. She didn't even know how it happened, how either of those happened. It had all been so sudden. One moment they were all having a blast, enjoying the post-Quidditch tournament party; the next moment Hermione was dead, Harry was missing, and she and the others were returning home early. School had ended.

A knock on her door alerted her to the presence outside. Curious, she opened the door to discover something that pierced the darkness gathering in her mind.

"Hannah!" She squealed, embracing her friend who released a similar squeal. "Oh, I've missed you so much! I'm so glad you're here I... I was..."

"It's okay." Hannah embraced her friend tighter. "I feel the same way."

"I thought you might like having a familiar face around to keep you company," Auntie Amelia said. The stern woman stood behind the two, her eyes tired and her shoulders hunched. She still somehow managed a smile despite her clear exhaustion. "With everything that's happened, I don't think it's good for you girls to be left alone to your thoughts."

Susan didn't need to be a genius to know she was talking about Harry and Hermione. She sent her auntie a grateful smile. "Thank you."

As her auntie left, Susan and Hannah went into her room and sat on the bed. They spoke for a while, not talking about anything serious, simply expressing how happy they were to see each other. Susan learned that Hannah's dad was off somewhere again, Rome. Apparently something went wrong with one of the vineyards there and he'd had to rush across the sea. Her mum was staying at home.

"What have you been up to since school ended?" Susan asked, leaning against several pillows she'd propped against the headboard. Hannah lay on her stomach near the foot of the bed, her feet kicking back and forth

through the air.

"Not much, really." Hannah sighed. "There really isn't that much to do right now, and with... with all the stuff that's happened, I haven't really felt up to doing anything lately."

"I know what you mean." Susan tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear. "All I've done for the past week was sit around, eat and sleep. I'm just to..."

"Yeah..."

The two girls trailed off. Conversation ceased. Tension, awkward and thick, hung in the air, a cloud of stormy emotions causing what should have been a beautiful reunion to turn sour.

Susan Bones frowned. This wasn't how it should be. She and Hannah and all of their friends, they shouldn't be like this. They should be helping each other, leaning on each other for support. Hadn't that been what Headmaster Dumbledore told them at the end of the year? That they should be supporting each other during times like this?

"In dark times such as these, we must learn to rely on each other. When things become too tough to face on your own, do not hesitate to lean on your friends, for they will never let you down."

Yes, those had been his words. That they should learn to rely on each other; that they shouldn't hesitate to use their friends for support. That's what they needed to do. Not sit around in bed all day moping. They should be with their friends, helping each other.

Susan's determination hardened as she came to a decision.

"Susan?" Hannah asked, startled when Susan climbed off the bed.

"Come on."

Susan grabbed Hannah's right hand, pulled her off the bed and out of the room.

"Where are we going?"

"To see Auntie Amelia."

They found auntie Amelia in her office. The office, a large study with white carpet, beige walls and a roof of the same color, held the spartan appearance her auntie favored. Her auntie had never been one for ostentatious appearances, something about not liking her work space becoming cluttered. A desk sat in the back, a book case off to the side. Before the desk were two chairs and in the center of the room sat two leather sofas with a coffee table in between.

Her auntie sat behind her desk, writing something in a muggle notebook with a muggle pen. Susan almost smiled. Harry had been the one to suggest using muggle writing supplies over quills and parchment; something about muggle-made artifacts being more efficient and less costly, which made sense as a single quill cost five galleons while a muggle pen cost less than a pound.

"Auntie?"

"Just a minute, Susan," her auntie said, not looking up from her work. Susan and Hannah shared a look, before silently moving to the couch.

"She looks busy," Hannah whispered, "what do you suppose she's working on?"

"She's been manning the search for..." Susan hesitated. "For Harry."

Hannah winced.

"I-I see." She offered her friend an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked."

Susan shook her head. "You don't need to apologize. We're all worried about him." Hannah nodded, but still looked upset at herself.

Several minutes later, Auntie Amelia finished whatever she'd been working on. She set her pen aside and propped her elbows on the desk.

"I'm sorry for ignoring you two," she said, her smile tired. Susan could see bags forming under her auntie's eyes.

"Mm mm. Don't worry about it, Auntie Amelia." Susan shook her head as she and Hannah moved from the sofa to the chairs in front of the desk. "I know you're really busy with work."

"Have you found Harry yet?" Hannah blurted out. Seconds later the blond girl slapped a hand over her mouth, eyes wide. "S-sorry. That just sort of came out."

"It's fine." Auntie Amelia sighed. She leaned back in her desk, her face truly showing how weary she felt. Susan wondered if her auntie was getting enough sleep. "I know how worried you are about Mr. Potter. I'm pretty worried as well." Her auntie rubbed her temple with her right hand. "Unfortunately, we have not found any leads on Mr. Potter's whereabouts. We checked his relatives and it seems someone wiped their memories of Mr. Potter clean from their minds."

"Obliviation?" Susan asked, eyes widening.

"They were indeed Obliviated, and quite skillfully, too." Auntie Amelia rubbed her jaw. "Whoever wiped their minds did a masterful job. They don't remember anything about Mr. Potter. We also checked with Mr. Potter's muggle friend, Lisa Crawft. She appears to have all her memories intact, but doesn't know anything as to his possible whereabouts either."

"Auntie?" Susan grew worried upon seeing the grimace on her aunt's face.

"It's nothing." Auntie Amelia dismissed her concern. "So then, as you can unfortunately see, we haven't managed to scrap together even a hint of where Mr. Potter might have gone." She gave them a wry smile. "But that's not what you came to talk to me about, is it?"

Susan shook her head. "No, I—we were wondering if we could get all of our friends together, like some kind of gathering, or something."

"Susan?" Hannah asked.

Auntie Amelia leaned back in her chair, visibly surprised. "You want to get your friends together?" Susan nodded. "All of them?"

"All of them," Susan confirmed.

XoX

Since the start of summer Tracey Davis and Lisa Turpin had spent almost every waking minute together. Out of all those who were considered "Harry's inner circle," they'd been hurt the most by the loss of their friend. Hermione had been closer to them than anyone else, the third member of their trinity. Her passing had left a gap in their hearts that simply couldn't be filled.

Tracey had spent much of her time not with Lisa crying. When she and Lisa were together they cried together, or reminisced about moments they'd shared with Hermione. They supported one another. Tracey knew that without Lisa she'd be even more of a wreck than she already was.

The two were currently sitting within Tracey's room, on the lightly colored carpet. Before them lay several dozen pictures, standard non-magical photos. They'd been taken by Hermione's mum when their friend invited them over to her house. She and Lisa had been quite shocked when they realized these pictures did not move. They'd been even more shocked when Hermione had introduced them to muggle television.

"Do you remember this time?" Tracey asked, pointing at one photo in particular. It was an image of the three of them in a small booth. Lisa's face dominated most of the screen, her wide eyes staring at them as if searching for something only she could see. "You were so shocked by the small camera in the booth that you stuck your face into the lens and this was the picture that came out." Tracey's chuckle was laced with sadness. "You were so fascinated with mugg—mundane technology that you always made a complete fool of yourself."

Lisa sniffled. Her tears had already dried, but the desire to continue shedding them still existed. Still, she tried for her friend to appear cheerful, just like Tracey did for her. "Yeah, well, you weren't much better. I still remember that one time we went to the movie theater and you flipped out."

"Hey!" Tracey pouted, crossing her arms under her chest. "Anyone who saw something like that Beast fellow would've freaked out too."

"I didn't."

"Yes you did. I saw you grabbing onto Hermione when he appeared."

"W-whatever."

A knock on the door precluded the entrance of Mrs. Davis. She peered at the two, her head poking into the room.

"Tracey, Lisa, I've got some lunch ready for you."

"Thanks, mum."

"Yes, thank you."

Tracey's mother came in bearing a tray of sandwiches. She set them down to the side on the floor, smiling sadly when she noticed the pictures laying between them.

"How are you two feeling?"

"Fine."

"Alright."

Mrs. Davis sighed. Tracey knew her mother didn't believe them, and she couldn't blame her. Neither she nor Lisa had been in good shape. Even now, Tracey knew that, were she to look in a mirror, bags would be hanging under bloodshot eyes. Her friend looked much the same.

"You know I just received a floo call from Madam Bones a little while ago." The two youngsters perked up, causing Mrs. Davis' smile to brighten. "She's apparently planning a get together for her niece and asked if you two would like to come over."

Tracey's eyes widened. A get together? With Susan? Did that mean the others would be going as well? She hadn't spoken to any of them since

returning home, having been too busy moping and crying to even think about her other friends.

Tracey swore to herself. How could she be so insensitive? Surely, she and Lisa weren't the only ones suffering. They'd all lost someone dear when Hermione died.

"We'd love to!" Tracey said before Lisa could get a word in edgewise.

Mrs. Davis smiled. "I'm glad to hear that. I'll let Madam Bones know that you would like to come over."

"Did she tell you who all was going to be there?" Lisa asked.

The smile on Mrs. Davis' face widened. "Why, all of your friends are going to be there, of course."

XoX

Susan had been waiting in anticipation of this day, the day she'd finally see her friends again. The thought of meeting them once more thrilled her. Not even her sorrow at the loss of Hermione and the missing Harry could keep that small ray of sunshine from entering her heart. It was her hope that by having her friends around, all supporting each other, that they could eventually destroy the bleakness no doubt surrounding them all.

Hannah had been with her since that day she'd first spoken to her auntie. She'd spent the night and they stayed up talking about the latest in wizarding fashion and listening to the Weird Sisters on the wireless. It had been fun, much more fun than when she'd been alone and drowning in sorrow. She could only hope this get together would help both her and her friends get through this.

The first to arrive was Blaise. He came in through the floo with his mother, looking far different now that he wasn't wearing robes. He'd donned much more casual clothes, slacks and a plain silk shirt. His mother was dressed to the nines, however, with a silk gown that shimmered in variations of red, constantly shifting whenever she walked. Her choice of attire played a sharp contrast to Blaise's clothing.

"Susan, Hannah." Blaise nodded to them both. Susan thought she saw a smile on his face, but couldn't be sure due to his haggard appearance. He looked tired, red eyes with slight bags underneath. Susan imagined he'd been having it just as bad as her. "It's good to see you two. I hope you've been doing well."

"About as well as can be expected." Susan smiled, and Blaise grimaced.

"Yes." He sighed, running a tired hand through his hair. The gesture was uncharacteristic of him. Susan wondered if he'd picked it up recently. "I imagine so, considering everything that's happened."

"And how've you been, Blaise?" asked Hannah.

"I've been better," Blaise admitted. Hannah flinched, but he offset the somewhat brittle words by gracing her with a more genuine smile.

"Though I will admit that seeing you two has really brightened my week. It hasn't been easy, this past week."

"I can imagine," Susan said.

While the three young people spoke, Madam Bones and Celestina also exchanged pleasantries.

"I really do have to thank you for inviting my son over," Celestina's words were surprisingly sincere. Rare were the times when she spoke without her tone containing a hint of mocking condescension. "Blaise has not been himself since this year's end—not that I can blame him, of course. Losing a friend is never easy and he's just lost two in the span of a few days. I had honestly been thinking about doing something similar to this but, well." She gave Amelia a slightly edgy smile. "Not all of the families my son has befriended like me very much."

Amelia observed the other woman with sharp, keen eyes. Slowly, she nodded. "Yes, I can see how that would be a problem. You are not well-liked among certain circles." The steel lacing her eyes spoke volumes of the stern woman's own thoughts. "However, you really have no one but yourself to blame for that. Perhaps if you weren't so keen on taking amusement from the suffering of others, people would enjoy your company more."

"And just where would I find my amusement, then?" Celestina's smile was wicked, more so than her eyes, which gleamed with an almost malicious light. "I must find my entertainment somewhere, and if the piping fools who enjoy puffing their own chests offer themselves so willingly to my clutches, then who am I to deny them?"

Amelia just sighed. "That sharp tongue of yours will get you into a lot of trouble some day."

"Perhaps, but the thrilling possibility of finding trouble is half the fun."

XoX

The group began to expand soon. Lisa and Tracey joined minutes after Blaise. The pair showed a remarkable difference in personality than Susan remembered. Tracey no longer shoved her foot in her mouth—in fact, she hardly spoke at all. Lisa didn't smile as much, and when she did they were filled with melancholy. It hurt, seeing her two friends like this.

"How've you two been?" Susan asked after exchanging hugs with the two girls. It wasn't something she'd done before, but she wanted to give them support. Hugs helped her when she felt down. Surely they'd help her friends, too. "I hope... well, I hope you haven't been, you know..."

"Crying our eyes out?" Tracey's smile reminded Susan of peanut brittle, sweet and flavorful, but easily broken. "We've done plenty of that already, so you don't have to worry about any waterworks from us... at least not right now."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

"Don't be." Tracey shook her head. "This is hard on all of us."

The group continue speaking in hushed tones. Mrs. Davis didn't stay for long, just enough to speak with Susan's aunt and Celestina before taking off.

Terry was the next to arrive. The subdued man greeted them all with a curt nod before remaining mostly quiet, only speaking when directly spoken to. Susan thought it seemed almost wrong how Tracey and Terry

didn't get up to their usual arguing.

The last of their group to arrive was Neville. He appeared with his grandmother, the Dowager Longbottom. While Neville walked toward his friends, the Dowager moved to greet Susan's aunt. Her nose wrinkled, however, when she saw who stood with her.

"Madam Bones," she said, her voice strained, but not enough that anyone except a skilled politician would notice. "It is good to see you again. You don't know how pleased I was to hear that you planned on throwing a small get together for the children."

"I thought it might do them some good," Amelia said, nodding toward the group of kids. "Susan and Hannah have been very distraught ever since returning home from school, and I believe that having their friends come over would help take away some of their pain."

"Indeed, my Neville has been much the same. Granted, he has always been a quiet, shy boy, but he hasn't spoken more than several sentences since school ended and has clammed himself in the green house." Dowager Longbottom sighed. "It's truly a tragedy, what happened this year: the opening of the Chamber, the petrifications, the loss of that girl... Hermione, I think her name was. Not to mention the disappearance of Mr. Potter." She turned to give the younger woman a freezing gaze. "You have not found him yet, have you?"

"No." Madam Bones sighed. "Though we have put much of our efforts into searching for him, we have not been able to locate him yet. We've even begun searching mundane London."

The Dowager raised an eyebrow. "Mundane? You have been listening to Mr. Potter's thoughts on muggle society, I see."

"Mr. Potter brought up many good points when I spoke with him on this. While innately superior due to our magic, that does not necessarily equate to us being better. He has given me much material on how mundane people work and think, and of the technology they have. Some of the things I already knew of; cars, airplanes and basic household appliances, but there are a few things I've learned that is truly astounding. Muggle Television, the internet—I've actually requested the

Department of Mysteries to study that and see if they can't reverse engineer that—and the rocket ship."

"Rocket ship?"

"A vessel shaped like a cylinder that is propelled by multiple rockets, which are sort of like large engines, and launches them into space. I hear Mundanes have even taken trips to the moon."

"Surely you jest."

"They have pictures."

"You know it's awfully rude of you to speak with another, even the host, without at least first greeting the other person in the room," Celestina said, and though her voice remained mild, it contained a razor's edge. "It's quite disappointing to see where your manners have gone, Dowager Longbottom."

"And it's quite disappointing to see you're still here," Dowager Longbottom retorted. "However, I put up with your presence because Amelia has allowed you into her manor, and it would be remiss of me to argue with you while I am a guest here."

Celestina crossed her arms under her prominent bust. "Hmph, you're no fun."

While the adults talked amongst themselves, the children moved several feet away and had their own conversation.

"It... really does feel like we're missing something without Harry and Hermione, doesn't it?" Terry was the first person to bring up the two elephants in the room. The others flinched. "It just seems so strange being together like this without them."

"Yeah..." Neville looked at the others. "I keep thinking all of this was just some kind of bad dream and that I'll wake up from it eventually."

"But you haven't, right?" Tracey's smile trembled, as if she might cry any second. "You keep on going to bed every night, hoping that this is all just

a dream and that tomorrow you'll wake up in your bed at Hogwarts, go to breakfast and be greeted by your friends." Her shoulders shook. "Only it never does, does it? You always wake up the next morning and realize that this is real; that Hermione is gone and she's never coming back, and that nothing you do can change that."

Lisa wrapped an arm around Tracey's shoulder, pulling the other girl into a comforting embrace. The others all looked at each other, vaguely uncomfortable at seeing a girl who used to be so upbeat and perky nearly in tears.

Susan's eyes hardened in determination. She moved to Tracey's other side and followed Lisa's example. While Tracey tried to stifle the flood of tears, Lisa sent the redhead a truly grateful look, to which Susan replied with a smile.

Conversation eventually became less painful. The group tried avoiding subjects that involved Hermione. No one wanted to see Tracey break down in tears. They spoke of Quidditch and fashion and hobbies, things that were as far from their friend as possible.

"Gran got me this new plant for my green house," Neville was saying with faux enthusiasm. Susan could hear how forced the words sounded, as if he were simply saying them to keep from thinking darker thoughts. "It's called a Fanged Geranium, a magical flower with sharp teeth. It's kinda difficult to take care of because it keeps trying to bite me, but it's a very useful potion ingredients."

"I've used it in potions before," Blaise said, nodding his head.

"Something wrong, Tracey?" Lisa asked when she noticed her friend frowning.

"I'm just wondering where Harry is," Tracey confessed. "I'd expect him to be here for something like this. Did he just not get the memo or something?"

Silence descended upon the group. Susan and Hannah shared a look, before Susan turned to Tracey. "You mean you haven't heard?"

Tracy frowned at her. "Heard what?"

"Tracey, Harry's been missing since school ended. No one knows where he is."

"WHAT?!"

XoX

The room was dark; barely any light managed to penetrate the darkness. The windows were open, but the curtains had been closed, blocking out the sunlight.

The room was spartan, bare of all but the essentials. A bed sat against the wall furthest from the door, an owl stand next to the window, and a dresser and night stand stood in a corner.

A heady scent filled the air, fumes from a boiling cauldron in the center of the room. Situated on the cauldron's left was a table filled with numerous papers, scrolls of parchment, several notebooks filled to bursting with notes and a plain-looking diary with a hole through its center and dried ink like blood spreading across the cover.

Harry Potter stood in front of the cauldron. His right index finger made counterclockwise motions, his magic caused the mixer to stir the liquid at precisely timed intervals. Fumes rose from the cauldron, vapid and thick. Mist-like tendrils roiled outwards several times as the ingredients puffed and sputtered. The liquid inside, a thick yellow substance began turning a light green. Nodding to himself, he grabbed the diary and unhesitatingly cut a piece off to cast into the cauldron, which puffed before shifting in the color spectrum once again.

Taking out a small sample with a spoon, he brought the liquid over to the table where he'd laid out a blank piece of parchment and poured the liquid onto the parchment. He watched, eyes narrowed as the liquid splashed against the rough surface before being absorbed and turning the parchment green.

Nodding to himself, Harry waved his hand at several vials, which filled themselves with the rest of the potion. He then cleaned up his workspace

with another hand wave before moving over to his desk and getting out more notes.

After obliterating his relatives, Harry Potter had gone into mundane London and rented out a small flat near Regent Square. It was within walking distance from the British Library, which he enjoyed, and was relatively quiet, with few other residents to bother him, allowing him to practice his magic and experiments unobstructed.

So far most of his experiments had been trying to determine the magic used to create Tom Riddle's diary. Even a little over a week after he destroyed it, dark magic still surrounded the diary, a remnant of the terrible power it once possessed. He wanted to find out what this magic was. How could someone preserve their memory into a diary like that? What's more, he wanted to know how a memory could gain a form through leeching off another's magic. More importantly, he wanted to find out who Tom Riddle was; find out if he was still alive, and if so, kill him.

But that was for later. The potion would take a while to do its job deciphering the dark magic signature, probably a few days at least. In the meantime, he would start working on some of his other projects.

Harry hadn't given up on learning more alchemy. He'd been steadily working toward his goal. Given a bit more time, he was sure he'd be able to create the perfect sparring partner—or the body for his perfect sparring partner, at least.

He looked at the large sheet of paper on his desk. It contained a transmutation circle, the most complex one he'd drawn thus far. A circle with two five-pointed stars with each triangle point containing alchemical symbols: power, durability, life and death. It wasn't complete; some symbols were still missing, but he was positive he'd be ready to start testing his circle soon. He just needed to do some shopping for supplies...

Harry blinked when the curtains to his room burst open and Hedwig swooped in.

"Where you have you been, Hedwig?"

A trill. Hedwig dropped a newspaper onto his desk and swooped back out.

Harry frowned as she disappeared into the distance. He couldn't understand anything she'd just said. Why couldn't he understand her? Why wasn't his ability to send and receive images via telepathy working?

In the end he shrugged. His strange disconnection with Hedwig was the least of his worries right now.

He looked at the newspaper she'd dropped on his desk and picked it up, reading the front headline news.

HARRY POTTER MISSING!

By Rita Skeeter

Yes dear readers, you've heard right. It has officially been revealed to us that one of our greatest celebrities, the young heir Harry Potter, age 10, has gone missing. According to report, heir Potter disappeared almost immediately after muggle friend, Herminish Granger, was tragically murdered at Hogwarts. The Aurors have begun a frantic investigation into his whereabouts, but it looks like, once again, they are proving to be as incompetent as always.

One must ask themselves why heir Potter has chosen to disappear from the public eye. Was he grief-stricken over the death of his friend? Or is there something more sinister going on in the works here. Having been given the chance to speak with some of heir Potter's companions at school, this reporter was able to learn much.

"Potter's always been a bit of a bigot," upstanding pureblood, Draco Malfoy, said. "All you have to do is listen to the way he talks down to people to know he's egotistical; always giving lectures, always belittling others in class. I actually tried befriending him once, but after seeing the way he treated others, retracted my hand of friendship."

For the past two years now, heir Potter has come off as an upstanding young man, a paragon of nobility and everything we've come to expect from a celebrity of his stature. But what if all of that's a lie? What if his

amiable personality is merely a smokescreen hiding the monster within it? And how does Harry Potter's disappearance coincide with Harmony Granger's death? This writer doesn't know, but you can be sure she's willing to do what it takes to find out.

For more information on Harry Potter, see page 4.

For more information on Hermione Granger, see page 8.

Harry tossed the newspaper into the trash. He knew he should be angry by the article, but all he felt was a sense of apathy. What did he care if those people thought him a monster? They didn't matter, did they? Just a bunch of sheep following the herd. A little good will and a few coins placed in the right hand would cure any ill feelings people had toward him. It worked well enough for Lucius Malfoy; it would work just fine for him.

Sitting back down at his desk, Harry got back to work.

First off, I would like to thank everyone who's been reading this story. Thank you and I hope you have a Merry Christmas... unless you don't celebrate Christmas, in which case I wish you a happy holidays.

Second, I have an announcement to make and two favors to ask. Starting today and ending on Thursday, December 25 th , my book, A Fox's Love, will be free to download on Amazon Kindle. This is a limited time deal that I can only afford to do once, and only for this book. I'd like to ask that all of you who enjoy reading my stories and haven't gotten this book, please go onto Amazon, download it, give it a read and, if you like it, please leave a review on my books Amazon page (or goodreads if you've got an account there), letting everyone know what you liked about it. Consequently, if you thought it was crap, I would love to personally pick your brain. Please send me a message so I might be able to figure out where you feel I went wrong and do better next time.

If you don't have a Kindle, do not worry, you can download a Kindle application onto your computer and/or mobile phone for free. I

myself don't have a Kindle, but I do have an android, which is where I read my ebooks.

For those of you who are patiently waiting for the next installment, I ask for just a little more patience. I'm having manga illustrations done to go with Book 2, so it's taking a bit more time than I initially suspected. My hope is to have it ready to launch sometime next Spring.

Thanks again, and I hope you all have a great holiday.

Coming Together

Chapter 2: Coming Together

A woman emerged from a large fire place. Her fashionable black heels clicked along the marble floor. Her wizarding robes looked more like a dress than actual robes. Black satin glimmered as she strode across the large foyer, ignoring the imposing columns and ornate paintings.

Her march took her all the way to a large, imposing staircase that branched in two directions. The white marble of the staircase contrasted with the dark green carpet that had been placed over the stairs.

A pop, the sound of air being displaced, alerted her to the presence of a house elf appearing. She paused to stare down at the little creature, its ears flopping and its refined outfit fitting its frame. It wore the symbol of the Most Noble House of Greengrass on its front.

"May I help you, madam?"

"Well now, this is a surprise," she said, holding a hand demurely to her lips, the better to hide her smile, "I had not been aware that Nathaniel had gotten himself a house elf. Well, no matter. Please inform your master that Celestina Zabini, Head of the Most Noble House of Zabini, is here and would like to meet with him."

The house elf stared for a little while longer, before slowly bowing before her.

"Very well, Lady Zabini."

There was another crack of displaced air, and the house elf vanished, leaving her alone.

With nothing to do but wait, she amused herself by studying the various paintings that lined the foyer. All of them were fine pieces, exquisite works of art that defied description; landscapes that displayed incredible

scenes of beauty and differing techniques. They also cost a small fortune. Nathaniel Greengrass must be doing very well for himself if he could afford these.

The air popped again. Celestina turned back to the house elf, who bowed before her.

"The master will see you now."

"Very well then. Lead the way," she smiled, "It has been so long since I've last been here that I fear I no longer know how to get to Nathan's study."

The house elf bowed again.

"Of course, Lady Zabini."

Celestina followed the house elf up the flight of green carpeted stairs, and through a number of corridors. As she walked, she silently studied the house of her old friend.

This place looked nothing like the Greengrass manor that she used to know. Back before the death of Mary Anne Greengrass, this manor had been such a lively place, with bright colors and an inviting atmosphere. But no more. Instead of warm and inviting, it was cold and impersonal, no doubt a reflection of its owners current state of mind.

They eventually reached an elegantly crafted wooden door. Several designs that she recognized as ward schemes ran across varnished rosewood, hidden behind motifs and swirling patterns. Nathaniel must have become awfully paranoid if he was having defensive arrays like that placed on his door. She eyed the crest in the center: a King Cobra on a grassy field, coiled and ready to strike. Below that, the Greengrass family motto, *Agnus in herba*, was displayed underneath in golden cursive.

"The master is waiting for you," the house elf bowed, opening the door with a snap of his fingers.

Celestina strode through the door and surveyed the room with a keen eye. Dark green carpet, wood panelled walls, expensive furnishings, this room was no doubt designed to impose Nathaniel's importance on all

who entered. In the back of the room, sitting behind a rich desk made of walnut and drafting papers, was the person that she had come all this way to meet.

She smiled.

"Nathan, it's so good to see you. I hope you're doing well."

"I believe I told you to never call me that again," Nathaniel did not look up from his work.

"You've told me a lot of things," Celestina walked further into the room, only stopping upon reaching the man's desk, "I see that you have been doing well for yourself. I suppose I should have expected that, Mr. Representative for the ICW. Your power within the ministry has certainly solidified ever since you became a most esteemed member of the International Confederation of Wizards, though I do have to wonder what caused you to choose such a career path. As I recall, you originally wished to go into archaeology."

"That was an old dream, one belonging to a naive and foolish young man, and one not suitable for a person of my station."

"Oh my," she held a hand to her lips, "A person of your station, hm? You know, I remember a time when you cared little for one's station. I even remember when you used to argue with your parents, making claims that you would be whatever you wanted to be, and that they could do nothing to stop you. Ah, such an amusing boy you were back then, so full of life and vigor. I wonder where that person has disappeared to?"

Nathaniel paused in his work, then restarted. She smiled. Was that annoyance that she sensed?

"What is it that you want, Lady Zabini?"

"Lady Zabini? Such a cold thing to call an old friend. I'd much rather you call me Celestina."

"I'd much rather not."

"How cruel."

Another pause. Celestina kept her smile on. It seemed Nathaniel Greengrass wasn't as unemotional as he tried making everyone believe. She wondered how far she could push him before he snapped, though she dared not try. She didn't wish to jeopardize the reason for which she had come.

"All pleasantries aside, I am actually here on behalf of my son and his friends. They are all quite worried for their friend, young Daphne, you see. I do not blame them. It must be difficult for them, knowing where she is but not being able to see her. Young people need to interact with their friends, you know. It's a very important part of growing up. That is why I would like to request that you allow Daphne and her younger sister, sweet little Astoria, to visit my manor for the summer. It would do my son a world of good to see his friend again, especially after the most recent tragedy that has befallen them."

Celestina knew of what happened at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. It had been in the front page headlines of the Daily Prophet for nearly a week-at least until news of Harry Potter's disappearance reached the media, which had now become the number one headline for the past several days. And she knew that Nathaniel was aware of what had happened, too. As a political savant, and one who belonged to the ICW, it was important that he keep abreast of all matters which could affect his social standing.

"I do not see why I should allow Astoria or Daphne to go anywhere," Nathaniel informed her in his cold, impersonal way, "My heir is currently undergoing training, and must be kept in isolation until such a time as I am satisfied."

Which meant he was keeping Daphne locked up in her room, probably in order to break her of all her emotions by forcing her to remain alone in her time of grief until she snapped. Celestina almost sighed in frustration. That just would not do.

"Then I suppose you leave me no choice," she sighed dramatically, "I suppose I will have to inform certain parties of the events that took place

around eighteen years ago, when a certain impulsive and brash young man snuck out of Hogwarts, and took his beau to see a Led Zeppelin concert."

She cracked a smile when Nathaniel stiffened. Time for the coup de grace.

"And I suppose, I shall also have to give those certain parties these pictures," she reached in between her bosom, and pulled out a number of pictures. Standard non-magical photos that didn't move. All of them featured a young man with blond hair and blue eyes, and a beautiful young woman with hair several shades lighter than the man and sea green eyes. They were at a muggle rock concert. In the middle of a mosh pit. Going crazy. The young man was headbanging.

Nathaniel's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly.

"Where did you get those?"

Celestina smiled. She felt overflowing with victory and win.

"Oh, I just found them lying around one day while I was going through some old photo albums," she replied airily, "Now then, about young Daphne and Astoria..."

XoX

Daphne gripped Astoria's hand as she led the younger girl to their father's study.

She didn't know why they had been called, nor did she know how she was supposed to feel about being called. From the moment she had arrived home for the summer holidays, her father had practically confined her to her room, only allowing her out during meal times. She knew why, of course; her outburst when she had first arrived home had been completely unbecoming of an heiress to the Most Noble House of Greengrass.

That had been the first time in a long time that she had seen her father angry. She still shuddered upon remembering the look of disgust and

rage that had been just barely concealed behind his icy-cold facade. She never wanted to see that expression again.

"What do you think Lord Greengrass wants?" Astoria asked.

Daphne looked at her sister and frowned. Astoria had also been punished, but not because the girl had done anything wrong. Her father knew of the love that she had for her sister. He had punished Astoria in order to punish her. Even now she could see the bruise hidden underneath her sister's shirt, crawling up the girl's neck like an insidious parasite that had burrowed under her skin.

"I don't know," Daphne admitted, "It could be anything." She paused, her eyes showing the concern she felt. "Are you alright, Stori?"

Astoria gave her sister a brave smile that Daphne knew she didn't feel. Her sister feared their father even more than she did.

"I'm fine. He hasn't touched me since confining you to your room."

"That's good," she sighed in relief. That meant it had been a one time thing, then. He'd probably punished Astoria in front of her to show what would happen to her sister if she let her emotions slip again. She would have to be more careful about not displaying any emotions from now on.

They reached their father's study, and Daphne knocked on the door.

"Enter."

Taking a deep breath, gripping Astoria's hand fiercely, Daphne opened the door and entered the room.

"Lady Zabini?" Daphne almost gawked when she saw the mischievously smiling woman standing in her father's study. What was Celestina Zabini doing here? Her father hadn't had contact with the woman for several years now; ever since mother had died. Only the knowledge that gawking would be met with punishment kept her from actually doing so.

"Hello, Daphne, Astoria," Lady Zabini's eyes twinkled merrily. The woman seemed inordinately pleased with herself. "How have you two been?"

"I've been good," Astoria spoke before Daphne could stop her. She glanced at their father, whose expression remained unreadable. He seemed to be radiating annoyance, and she wondered what had happened between him and Lady Zabini.

Lady Zabini's light, airy laugh filled the room.

"I am glad to see that you're in such high spirits. I must admit, it is a pleasure to see you again after so long. I haven't been able to so much as lay eyes on you since you were just a toddler crawling around on the floor, following after Daphne." While Astoria both blushed and scowled, Lady Zabini turned to her. "And you, Daphne, has your summer been well?"

"It has," Daphne lied smoothly, her mind quickly falling back to her usual icy mien. She couldn't allow herself to show weakness in front of her father. "And you, Lady Zabini? I trust that you and your children are doing well?"

"Times could be better," Lady Zabini admitted graciously, "However, let us not speak of such things." She clapped her hands. "Now then, Daphne, Astoria, do you have your bags packed? If not, then I suggest you hurry and pack them."

Daphne looked at her father, who remained sitting in his chair behind the desk, looking like he'd just swallowed a lemon, then back to Lady Zabini. What was going on here? Why was her father not saying anything? What did Lady Zabini mean by pack their bags? Were they going somewhere?

"Why are we packing our bags? Are we going somewhere?" Astoria asked, voicing the questions that Daphne wished to know.

Lady Zabini's smile contained enough devious delight that a thrill ran down Daphne's spine.

"Why yes, we are. You and Daphne shall be staying over at my manor for the summer holidays." Daphne's mind blanked. Lady Zabini's smile widened. "Now then, please go and pack your things. We'll be leaving in a few minutes. And don't worry, your father has approved this."

A glance at her father revealed that he had yet to move from his spot. He stared at her, his normally cold, unfeeling eyes tinged with annoyance. Was this really happening? Was her father actually letting them go over to another person's house? And Lady Zabini's at that!

"Really?! We're really going over to your house?" an excited Astoria complete lost her composure. Daphne glanced warily at her father, whose right hand twitched.

"That's right," Lady Zabini's merry smile gained several levels of mischief, "You two are going to be staying with me for the holidays, so you need to go pack your bags and get prepared."

"Come on, Daphne!"

Astoria dragged her out of the room. Daphne could do nothing but follow, her mind shot, more blank than it would have been if someone had obliterated it.

What just happened?

XoX

The fire roared as she and her sister emerged from it. They stepped into a modest living space. Their shoes touched against soft carpet, as the flames went from green back to their standard orange and red.

"Daphne!"

A shout came from her left, and Daphne was nearly bowled over by an overly excited Tracey.

"W-what? Tracey?" She looked down at the girl hugging her around the waist. "What are you doing here, Trace?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Tracey asked. When Daphne just gave her a flat look, she continued. "We're all staying with the Zabinis."

Daphne raised an eyebrow.

"We?"

"That's right."

"Hello, Daphne," another voice spoke up from somewhere to her left. She turned to look at the source. "It's good to see you again. We were very worried about you."

"Susan?"

Daphne blinked when she saw the redhead, and then blinked again when she saw everyone else. Standing next to Susan was what looked like their entire group. She saw Hannah and Lisa and Terry and Blaize. They stood just a few feet away. The only person missing was Neville and... "Where's Harry?"

The group all turned to look at each other. Daphne frowned when she saw the expressions on her friends' faces. Something unsettling dropped into her stomach, a led ball of anxiety that she couldn't brush away.

"You mean you haven't heard?" Tracey asked in shock. Daphne frowned at her.

"I've hardly even been out of my room," Daphne grumbled, "Of course I haven't heard."

"Daphne," Tracey said, "Harry has been missing ever since school ended."

"W-what?"

Daphne stared at her friend, wide eyed. She knew that Harry had disappeared sometime during school, and that no one could find him. However, she had just suspected that he was trying to avoid crowds in order to be left alone with his grief. She hadn't realized that he was actually missing.

"I... I don't understand. Harry is missing?"

"Yeah," Tracey nodded, "And no one's been able to find him ever since,

well... you know. Anyway, there are search parties happening all over. The entire auror force has been searching for him. I hear they've even started searching for him in muggle London."

Susan and the others walked up to them. Daphne looked at Susan, who confirmed her silent question with a nod.

"Aunty has ordered all of her auror forces to be on the lookout for him, and she's got one-third of the forces actively searching for him. They haven't had much luck finding him yet, but she told me that they're going to be expanding their search radius soon, so hopefully, they'll find him, or at least a clue that will lead them to him."

"I... I see," she muttered, resisting the urge to clutch at her chest, where a sharp pain had flared up, as if she was being pricked with a needle. She didn't want to show weakness to her friends.

"So wait," Astoria said suddenly, "Harry Potter is missing? Why would he be missing?"

Everyone became silent. Lisa and Tracey grew unusually solemn, and Tracey even looked about ready to cry. Blaise had closed his eyes and muttered something under his breath, while Terry had gone deathly still. Hannah leaned into Susan, and Daphne could see the redhead trying to put up a brave front for their friends.

"Guys?" Astoria asked, her voice suddenly small as she seemingly realized that she had just stepped on a landmine.

"Stori," Daphne said in a quiet voice, attracting her sister's attention, "I'll tell you what happened some other time. Please, just let it go for right now."

Astoria looked ready to protest, but thankfully didn't. The young blond girl stared at her, as if searching for something in her eyes. Daphne didn't know what her sister was looking for, or if she even found it, but the young girl eventually nodded.

"I... okay, Daph, I won't ask anymore questions."

"Thank you."

A loud clap got everyone's attention.

"Now, now children," Lady Zabini smiled at the group, "Why don't we shelve this depressing conversation, hm? I didn't invite you all over so that you could mope around my home. Why don't you girls show Astoria and Daphne where they'll be staying? Then you can join the boys in the game room and have some fun."

"Game room?" Daphne looked at Blaize, who gave her an eloquent shrug.

"Mum's recently picked up a fascination for non-magical games, billiards in particular. Not sure why."

"Now don't be like that, Blaize. Billiards is a game that requires skill and precision to play, and unlike a magical game, it won't blow up in your face."

"Mum's got really bad luck when she plays wizarding games," Blaize added, causing his mother to pout at him, "Any time she plays, she almost always ends up having something explode in her face."

"You had better be careful when airing my dirty laundry, Blaize, lest you find yourself stranded in the middle of Africa with no way of getting home." Blaize became just a tad paler. Lady Zabini smiled and clapped her hands once more. "Now then, come along girls. Show these two where they shall be staying. Blaize, Terry and I shall wait for you in the game room."

Lady Zabini placed an arm around her son's shoulder, causing him to go deathly stiff. She placed her other arm around Terry, who suddenly blushed under the contact, then led the two away.

"Stop scowling, Tracey," Lisa said in response to the nasty look on Tracey's face. Daphne felt a touch of amusement as she saw her friend trying to bore a hole through Lady Zabini's back with her eyes.

"I'm not scowling," Tracey muttered angrily.

"Yes, you are," Lisa immediately shot back, smiling, "And I think I know why."

Tracey's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Oh yeah? And why is that?"

"You're jealous."

"W-w-what?" Daphne witnessed something truly amazing: Tracey stuttering and blushing. "I-I am not jealous! Why would I be jealous of that stupid, cow-chested old hag!"

Lisa's smile was mysterious.

"Why indeed."

"I think it's because Tracey likes Terry," Hanna commented. Tracey whirled on the girl and pointed, her face a rictus of embarrassed outrage.

"I do not!"

"She totally likes Terry," Lisa confirmed with a nod, "That's why she's always fighting with him. She argues with Terry because she wants him to pay attention to her."

"No, I don't! You don't know what you're talking about!"

"It's okay, Tracey," Hannah told the loudmouth, her expression mockingly sympathetic. Daphne had the distinct impression that Hanna was getting revenge for all the times Tracey had said something stupid. "There's nothing wrong with having a crush on Terry. He's a good catch, I suppose. He's smart and he's not bad looking. He likes Quidditch, and he enjoys arguing just as much as you do. You two are a match made in heaven."

"Stop picking on me, dammit!"

"We're not picking on you," Lisa's faux-frown told Daphne that they were, indeed, picking on Tracey, "We're simply telling you that we support your

relationship with Terry."

"I'm not in a relationship with Terry!"

Daphne watched on the sidelines as Hannah and Lisa double-teamed Tracey, flustering the poor girl with their constant remarks about her relationship with Terry. She didn't really know if Tracey liked Terry, or if the girl simply argued with him because that's just what Tracey did, but she couldn't deny that watching the girl being picked on by their friends amused her. She must be a bad person to take entertainment in her friend's plight.

Susan pressed a hand to her forehead and sighed.

"Come on, you two. I'll show you where all of us are staying."

"All of us?" Daphne asked.

"Yes," Susan nodded, "Us, that is, we girls, are all sharing a room together. It was Ms. Zabini's idea."

"Oh."

"What about them," Astoria pointed at the trio still arguing. It had somehow devolved into Tracey trying to put Hannah and Lisa in a headlock. Considering there were two of them and one of her, it wasn't working out too well for the girl. Susan glanced at the three, then turned back to Daphne and Astoria, giving them a weak smile.

"They're not going to stop any time soon, I'm afraid. They've been doing this ever since, well, they've been teasing her for a while now," Susan smoothly changed the subject by leading her and Astoria to the door, "Anyway, let's get going. I'm sure those three will catch up once they realize that we've left."

"FOR THE LAST TIME! I'M NOT IN LOVE TERRY!"

"... Maybe."

XoX

Dumbledore was sitting in his office. In his hands was the Daily Prophet. He normally didn't read the Daily Prophet, except when he wanted a good laugh, but these days, even false news derived from a newspaper like this one was like an Elixir of Life to him. And he'd become rather good at reading between the lies and coming to his own conclusions.

Just then, his ward's flared to life, just like he'd anticipated. He had actually been expecting this meeting for a while, ever since he'd seen the front page headline for the Daily Prophet this morning, in fact.

"Come in, Cornelius," he called out, then waited. He could almost picture the way the minister had paused at the door, standing there with a stunned expression etched upon his face. It would have amused him in most circumstances, this image, but the gravity of recent events weighed him down too much to take joy in much of anything.

"You really do need to tell me how you do that, Albus," Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, said as he entered the room and closed the door behind him.

"It is merely a matter of experience and logical deduction, Cornelius," Dumbledore replied as he set the newspaper aside and placed his hands on the desk, "Now then, what may I do for you, Minister?"

Cornelius stopped in front of his desk, wringing his hands together.

"I need your help. I'm sure you've seen the front page of this morning's Daily Prophet."

Dumbledore glanced at the Daily Prophet. The front page headline read "*Sirius Black Escapes from Azkaban!*" in big bold print. Below the headline title was an image of the man in question, his snarling visage containing insanity as he fought against the chains wrapped around him.

"I have indeed," he turned back to Cornelius, "And I must admit, we have quite the predicament on our hands. Sirius Black escaping from Azkaban prison is startling enough, but with everything that's happened recently, the situation with Black may escalate to unprecedented levels."

"Harry Potter," Cornelius said. Dumbledore nodded.

"Harry Potter is still missing, and now Sirius Black has escaped from Azkaban. If we do not find Mr. Potter before Black does, I fear what may happen to him." Dumbledore paused to collect his thoughts. "Do we know how Black escaped?"

"We don't," the confession made Cornelius' shoulders slump, "We've questioned all of the guards, but none of them ever saw Black leave his cell, and there are no signs that he broke out. It's as if he simply vanished."

Dumbledore contemplated this new information. People, even wizards, do not simply vanish. They could apparate, but Azkaban was heavily warded. Apparition was impossible there. So was portkeying, for that matter. For someone to escape, they would have to not only break out of the prison, but also sneak past all of the guards, which included the dementors-the most vile creatures that Dumbledore ever had the displeasure of meeting. There was a reason no one had escaped Azkaban.

At least until now.

"When was the last time Black was seen?" he asked. Cornelius' face scrunched up.

"The last time he was seen? I believe that was when I visited Azkaban on a routine inspection-I do that twice a year, you know, in order to make sure the prisoners are behaving. Black was the last prisoner I visited there. He seemed unusually lucid, unlike the other prisoners, perfectly capable of holding a conversation. He was even polite, greeting me as if I were an old friend or something-preposterous as the notion may be. I had that morning's Daily Prophet with me, and he asked if I would let him read it. I, well, I didn't see the harm in that, so I gave the paper to him. He apparently disappeared a few hours later. No one saw him leave, though, and the cell was still locked."

"I see," Dumbledore stroked his beard, a habit that he had picked up after watching Disney's *The Sword and the Stone*. It was a very good show-even if it wasn't a very realistic depiction of Merlin. "And was there anything incriminating in that newspaper? Something that may have set

him off?"

"I... I'm not sure," Cornelius looked uncertain, "I mean, it was just the usual news that we've been having. He did seem unusually interested in two of the articles, though..."

"I suspect one of them was on the missing Harry Potter?" Dumbledore didn't really need to inquire. Harry's disappearance remained news even two weeks after the media had found out about it. There had recently been a string of *Harry sightings* articles, though none of them had ever amounted to anything. According to Amelia, all of the Harry sightings had proven to be false leads. He suspected the articles were simply written as a means of turning a profit.

Cornelius nodded.

"It was."

"And what was the other one."

"I... I'm not sure," the Minister looked uncertain, "But he seemed unusually interested in one of the articles on page... two... I think it was."

Dumbledore almost sighed. That meant he would have to go back through the Daily Prophet from the other day and search for the article himself. It would be a bothersome task, but he couldn't afford to not look at every possible angle. Harry Potter's life could be at stake, and he refused to let another student die on his watch.

"What should I do?" Cornelius's desperation shone through in his pleading tone.

"The first thing that you must do, Minister, is not panic," Dumbledore informed the rotund man, "If you panic, then it will lead to you making rash decisions. You must remain calm."

Cornelius looked very much like those non-magical bobblehead dolls that Dumbledore had seen on car dashboards as he nodded.

"Right. Calm. Remain calm. Okay. I think I can do that."

He clearly couldn't, but Dumbledore decided not to tell him that.

"The next thing you need to do is contact the Daily Prophet. Have them write up a letter in the form of an article addressed to Harry Potter, informing him of Sirius Black's escape from Azkaban and urging him to stop by the auror office, so that we can place him under our protection."

"Do you think that will work?"

"If by work, you mean do I think Harry will reveal himself to us, then no. Mr. Potter is a very stubborn young man. If he has decided to disappear, then I doubt this news will make him retract his decision." Cornelius' looked increasingly flustered by this news. "However, it should make Mr. Potter aware of the danger that Sirius Black poses to him. He is a very bright child, and I'm sure that he will become cautious and act with much more prudence. For the moment, we will simply have to trust in his intelligence. ability to think logically, and act in an appropriate manner when faced with a crisis such as this."

Cornelius seemed more than eager to implement this idea.

"And what of Black?"

"Black will likely be going after Mr. Potter. As we do not know where Mr. Potter is, there isn't a whole lot that we can do. My suggestion is to have the aurors set up a search net in areas of non-magical London, which is where I suspect Mr. Potter may be hiding, as we have yet to locate him anywhere else. Have them make silent inquiries with the non-magical population, asking them if they've seen either Mr. Potter or Black. Be sure to issue the aurors standard non-magical photos so the non-magical population will have faces to reference during the questioning."

"Should I also bring out the dementors?"

"No," Dumbledore almost scowled at the thought of those things being let loose, "Dementors do not distinguish between friend and foe, and they will cause mass panic to spread through the non-magical population, which will hamper the aurors search. Keep them in Azkaban."

"Uh... okay."

Cornelius looked almost taken aback, and Dumbledore realized that he was letting his anger get the best of him. He sat back down and took a deep breath. He must be really tired if he was letting his emotions get out of control like that.

"Be sure to implement these plans and orders the moment you are able to. It is imperative that you act with haste, but do not act rashly. Inform the aurors that they should be cautious when searching through London. We do not want to tip Mr. Potter or Black off to the fact that we are searching for them."

"Right."

"And make sure that you only have aurors specifically trained to interact with non-magicals committing to the search. The last thing we need are a bunch of people getting obliterated because one of the less knowing aurors decided to do something, shall we say, less than intelligent."

Cornelius Fudge soon left. Dumbledore watched the Minister walk out of his office, feeling even more exhausted than before their meeting. Fudge was a decent Minister during times of peace, but he couldn't deal with unexpected problems that arose during more stressful times. That he was also in Lucius Malfoy's pocket didn't help his case.

He put the Minister of Magic out of his mind, and focused on the newest problem at hand: Sirius Black.

Out of all the people who had been surprised by Black's betrayal of the Potter's, he was one of those who had been the most shocked. Sirius Black had always struck him as a stalwart and loyal friend. Back when Black and James had been attending Hogwarts, he had proven his loyalty time and time again by sticking with the brash and impetuous James Potter. Even after they graduated, Black had remained steadfastly loyal to James and Lily, or so Dumbledore had thought.

Dumbledore remembered when the Potter's went into hiding. He had been there when Lily Potter cast the Fidelius and made Sirius Black their secret keeper. He would have never expected Black to betray the Potter's at the time, but when he learned of what happened, of James' and Lily's death and Harry becoming an orphan, he'd realized how Black had

played them all.

I should have seen it coming...

It was always hard, watching as the people you were close to die. James and Lily had been friends. Out of all those who'd graduated these hallowed grounds, they were among the few that Dumbledore had truly been close to. Their deaths hurt, perhaps not to the same extent as the death of his dear sister, but he felt their deaths nonetheless.

After they'd died, Dumbledore had made a promise that he would do what he could to protect their son. He'd sent Harry to the Dursley's, where the young Potter heir would grow up away from the spotlight, away from the fans and, more importantly, away from potential assassination attempts.

He'd done everything he could to keep Harry's whereabouts a secret, even going so far as to cast an illegal warding scheme on the Dursley's house. It not only kept them from thinking about moving, but also kept anyone seeking to do Harry harm from ever discovering the location. With this, Harry Potter's location had all but vanished from the magical population, and any Death Eaters who might seek to harm him remained ignorant as to his whereabouts. He had even refused to go and visit, just in case people like Lucius Malfoy were watching his movements.

All that effort felt wasted now. Harry was gone and Sirius Black had escaped Azkaban, likely to seek out the young Potter heir in some misguided form of revenge. Dumbledore was at a loss. Everyone looked up to him, expecting him to have the answer for all of life's problems, for every emergency. They didn't realize that he, too, was only human.

Stay safe, Harry...

XoX

Harry Potter scowled as he stared at the remnants of his experiment to discover more about Tom Riddle's diary. There was nothing left of the blank parchment that he had used, nothing but ashes.

He'd been working on another of his experiments this morning. The

creation of an artificial body, a homunculus, when the parchment containing the potion plus absorbed piece of Riddle's diary had spontaneously combust and then crumbled to ash.

The potion that he had concocted was a simple one. It was an analysis potion, similar in many ways to the chemical sheets that muggles use to determine the various states of liquids. It could almost be likened to those tabs that people stuck in water to determine its quality, only instead of determining the quality of water, this determined the quality of magic.

"I should have realized such a simple potion wouldn't work for this," he muttered to himself, "The magic used in the creation of this diary is impossibly dark and incredibly powerful. It's no wonder the potion didn't work. I suppose I should just be glad it didn't explode in my face."

He looked at the remains of his potion, which had turned a murky black and looked more like tar than a potion. Scowling, he waved his hand to vanish it. When the potion didn't vanish, merely bubbling instead, he scowled even more.

"It seems the magic in Riddle's diary is too powerful for me to vanish."

Harry wished he could use his wand. He would probably be able to vanish the potion with his wand helping him empower and direct his spell. If only he could find some way to get rid of the trace...

"Would my mother's wand work for this?"

Deciding to see if it would work, Harry grabbed his mother's wand, only to drop it when he felt the wand nearly shock his hand off. He stared at his mother's willow wand as it clattered to the table. Was it... was it rejecting him? But why? It had always accepted him before, yet now it refused to let him even hold it. He didn't understand.

"Tch."

Left with no other recourse, Harry realized that he would have to dispose of the potion without magic.

The cauldron was heavy as he lifted it into his arms and carried it out of

his apartment, much heavier than a cauldron with a potion should be. Had the potions change in color and composition also changed its weight? Possibly. He would think on that later. First things first, he needed to get rid of this potion.

He walked down the well-lit hallway. His feet thudded along the beige carpet. White walls adorned with doors surrounded him on either side, each door numbered with triple digits. Being on the second floor, all of the numbers were over two-hundred. He didn't know any of his neighbors, nor did he care to know them. This was just a temporary residence until he moved on, and the people living in this complex were not worth knowing.

The wooden stairs creaked as he made his way down. It was an ominous sound. For a moment, he actually feared that the added weight of the cauldron may cause one of the stairs to break underneath him. That didn't happen, fortunately, though he did end up almost spilling some of the potion on one of the apartment's residence when she appeared before him from out of nowhere.

"Woah there, kiddo," the bubbly voice of a young woman said, as Harry forced his body to serve away from the woman in order to avoid landing on top of her. "You really should be more careful where you're walking, especially when you're lugging such a big, um, what is that thing anyway?"

Harry resisted the urge to scowl at the woman. Bubblegum pink hair that matched her personality descended from her head, long and shiny. Her eyes were blue and big, reminding him of bhambi. They sat upon a fair face with soft lips and a small nose. The knee-length dress that she wore flattered her feminine figure.

"It's a cauldron," he mumbled.

"Cauldon? You mean like some kind of magic playset?" The woman smiled. "Are you playing wizard or something?"

This time, he did scowl.

"Or something," he muttered irritably.

"That sounds like a lot of fun," the woman's cheerful voice grated on his nerves for some reason, "I remember back when I was younger, I used to pretend that I was a witch all the time. That was back when I believed that magic was real. Ah, I do miss those days."

He wondered how to get past this woman. He had no desire to listen to her, but she was also blocking his way down.

"Ah!" The woman gasped in surprise. "I completely forgot to introduce myself. My name is Victoria Jones. It's pleasure to meet you, um, what was your name again?"

Harry twitched. He hadn't told her his name.

"... Harry Evans."

"Harry Evans," the woman murmured, before smiling again, "Well, it is very nice to meet you, Mr. Evans. If you ever need anything, please don't hesitate to come to me. My apartment number is two-ten."

Harry almost twitched. His apartment was 212, which meant they were next door neighbors. Great. That was just what he needed. Was it some kind of karma that such an obnoxious woman would be living right next to him?

"I'll be sure to do that," Harry maintained his polite demeanor. He couldn't afford to let his annoyance get the best of him. Even if he didn't care one whit about this woman, he didn't want the kind of trouble that being on her bad side could cause.

"Good," Victoria Jones nodded, "In that case, I shall speak with you later. Also, and this is just a suggestion, you might want to do something about that smell. I don't know if it's you or that... stuff in your cauldron, but it absolutely reeks. Now then, I bid you a good day, Mr. Evans."

Harry watched warily as Victoria Jones slid past him and walked up the stairs. When she vanished from sight, he continued on his way, reaching the bottom and entering a small lobby. He lumbered past the small sitting area, where several chairs and a table with magazines on top sat.

The night greeted him upon vacating the apartment complex. He couldn't see many stars, but blamed that on the lights of London. It was always hard to see the night sky when you lived in the busier parts of a large city. Lamps and signs blazed all around him, their lights shining obnoxiously in his eyes, causing them intense irritation. His ability to see in the same spectrum as a Jaguar didn't help his poor eyes one bit. Cars drove down the street, engines rumbling. He ignored all of that as he walked ponderously toward the small alley on the side of his complex.

He welcomed the darkness of the alley. Few lights reached the small space that was barely wide enough to fit a car through. He could see much better in the dark than he could with all those lights and signs, and his eyes scanned the mostly empty space in search of a place to dump his ruined potion. A few pieces of trash lay strewn across the black top. A stray breeze caught a crumpled newspaper, lifting it in the air and blowing it out of the alley.

His eyes soon locked onto what he'd been looking for: a drain covered by a metal grating. He walked over to it and didn't hesitate to tilt the cauldron. The tar-like sludge oozed out of the cauldron slowly, viscous and putrid, bubbling as it released noxious fumes of dark purple and black. He grimaced as it splattered against the drain and stuck there, as if its glutinous consistency had become too thick to pass through such small spaces. It was fortunate that his magic, while incapable of vanishing the substance, could still affect it. He forced the liquid through the grating, pushing it down, until all that remained was a dark stain from which black vapor wafted off the metal like plumes of smoke from a fire.

"I don't think I'll be able to use this cauldron anymore," he muttered to himself as he looked into the cauldron. The entire thing had become a cesspool of black tar that continued clinging to the interior surface. Dark miasma rose from it, hissing and spitting, as if the last vestiges of the diary's vile presence had become infused with the cauldron. "I'll have to get rid of this somehow..."

A noise reached his ears, causing them to twitch. Footsteps, but not those of a human. He listened to the pitter patter of feet. Four of them. A cat? No. It sounded too heavy to be a cat? A dog, then.

His eyes panned the alley, searching. With his ability to see even in darkness, spotting the creature who'd made the noise wasn't difficult. It was a large dog. He judged it to be maybe four or five feet in length. He could see its ribcage poking out, a sign of malnutrition. Its black fur stood on end, unkempt and unclean, bristling like needles. A snarling muzzle filled with rows of sharp teeth were bared at him, and bright yellow eyes stared with the unusual gleam of human intelligence.

Despite how filthy and thin it had become, he recognized the animal easily.

"Padfoot."

The single word caused the dog to halt. It tilted its head, and Harry saw its eyes widen in a very un-dog-like way. Then it bolted out of the alley and down the street.

Harry gave chase. He didn't know what this man was doing here, but he had every intention of finding out.

So here is chapter two. We see a bit more of Blaize's mom, finally learn about what happened to Daphne, and I've granted some insight into Dumbledore's character. And, of course, we also see some Harry at the end. I know that Harry hasn't been featured very prominently yet, but that's mostly because I need to build up the other members of Harry's group. They become pretty important later on, and will eventually have their own moments to shine, so they need some development. That being said, the next chapter should have more Harry Potter.

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. Please let me know what you think. Good? Bad? Is there anything in here that you would like to see? Be sure to let me know.

Later. ^_^

Sirius Black

First, I'd like to apologize for not updating this in so long. I'm writing for a lot of stories right now, and it's hard to keep track of them all. Anyway, here is the next chapter. I hope you all enjoy it.

Chapter 3: Sirius Black

Harry did not know what Sirius Black was doing here. Had the man tracked him down? Was his father's supposed best friend even here for him? If so, how had Sirius found him? If not, why show up in non-magical Britain? Harry didn't know, couldn't know.

But, he was determined to find out.

Unfortunately, capturing Sirius Black was going to be harder than he'd originally assumed. His godfather was still in his dog animagus form, and was thus much faster than Harry in his human form. He was also being smart, sticking to places that were heavy with pedestrian traffic. Even at night, London was filled with people and cars as the many citizens enjoyed the nightlife.

He and Sirius raced through the streets of London. They must have made quite the sight; a large black dog being chased by a twelve year old boy. Many people stared as they passed, though most seemed to ignore them in favor of going about their business.

Harry growled as he caught sight of Sirius weaving through people's legs like water flowing around a boulder. He'd managed to keep up with the dog animagus by shoving inordinate amounts of magic into his legs, but he could already feel the damage it was doing to his body. His thighs and calves were beginning to break down. Magic was never meant to be used this way.

Another glimpse of black fur darting between the legs of a young woman who shrieked upon seeing the dog caused Harry to grit his teeth.

Sirius Black...

The name struck so many chords within Harry. He remembered Sirius quite well; the man he called Padfoot, the man who'd been given the title of godfather, the man his father trusted above everyone else.

He remembered the many times Sirius would visit them...

He remembered riding on Sirius' back while the man was in his dog form...

He remembered when Sirius would look after him while his parents were on missions for the Order of the Phoenix...

He remembered being told stories about his parent's time at Hogwarts, tales that were wholly inappropriate for a six month old baby to hear...

He remembered and remembered and remembered. Countless memories of Sirius stirred within his mind. Times where the man would visit, times where he would be scolded by Harry's mother for doing something stupid, times where the man and his father would regale him with tales. So many numerous memories, so many nostalgic moments.

It just made him angrier.

Perhaps if Harry were in his right mind, he would have never done what he did. Maybe if his head hadn't been clouded by anger, he would have been able to contain himself and think logically. He wasn't, however. In the face of someone who might have been complicit in his parent's murder, logic and reason were the last things on his mind.

In an effort to catch his godfather, Harry Potter transformed into a jaguar.

In the middle of London's busy streets.

XoX

Geoffrey Crawft was not a man who drank very often. As a businessman and an upstanding citizen who abided by laws of both the government and church, he rarely ever drank anything except perhaps a single glass

of wine on special occasions. Recently, however, he'd been hitting the bars a lot more.

"Bartender," he called out while gesturing to his empty glass, "another drink, please."

The bartender, a blond bombshell of a woman, smiled seductively as she refilled his drink. Geoffrey ignored her, his attention fixated on his glass being filled with amber liquid.

His family was going through a rough spot in their lives. His daughter had become a recluse and he and his wife were arguing more. It was their constant arguing that premeditated his coming out to this bar and drinking himself stupid at least two nights a week.

It's all that Potter boy's fault.

Geoffrey scowled as he thought about the boy his daughter was so smitten with. If Harry Potter had never met Lisa, his family wouldn't have been having all these issues. His little girl would still be an innocent child who didn't think about boys, and his wife would be on his side. Yes, everything would have been much better if that Potter boy had never come into his family's life.

It happened as he was taking a drink. As the amber liquid burned down his throat, screams erupted from outside. Geoffrey, drunk from lord-only-knew how many shots of scotch, allowed curiosity to overcome him, and he stumbled over to the window just in time to see a large black dog rush past.

He blinked, once, and then blinked again when something else that was large and black and most definitely not a dog rushed past the window as well.

"Was that a jaguar?"

Geoffrey stood there for several seconds, swaying drunkenly on his feet, before promptly deciding that he must have been hallucinating. Yes. Yes. There was simply no way a jaguar could be running around London. He must have had too much alcohol and was now having strange delusions.

"I am never drinking again."

XoX

Harry chased Sirius through the congested streets of London, ignoring the screams of fear as men and women ran away at the sight of him. A little voice in the back of his mind told him that he was doing something stupid, that it was illogical, reckless and liable to get him into serious trouble with the magical authorities. He ignored the voice, shoving it into the deepest recesses of his mind.

His only thoughts right then were on catching Sirius Black. It consumed him, this all-encompassing need to capture the man and force some answers out of him. His anger spurred him onward, made him ignore the people around him. They were unimportant. Mere sheep whose very lives were insignificant and meaningless. Nothing was important except capturing his estranged godfather.

With four legs propelling him forward and no one daring to come near him, Harry was able to catch up to Sirius quickly. The dog animagus barely had time to realize what was happening before he was upon the man-turned-animal, his teeth sinking into his godfather's neck as he pounced on the other wizard. Harry ignored the loud yelp and whimper of the other animagus as he injected his magic into the black dog through his fangs.

Jaguars do not have the ability to produce poison. It is a known fact of the animal kingdom. Harry Potter's jaguar form was fundamentally different from ordinary jaguars, however. Aside from the fact that it was the results of a magical transformation, Harry's form did have the ability to produce a paralysis venom with his saliva.

He didn't fully understand how this worked himself. Being a man of science, Harry had tried discerning how his jaguar form was capable of producing venom through experimentation, however, he was no closer to solving this problem. His only clue, or more like, the only hint he had was his parseltongue ability, but that didn't actually tell him anything. It certainly didn't explain why this form could produce venom.

At that moment, it hardly mattered. All he cared about was what he could do with it, and as Sirius Black's body went limp within his grasp, Harry

was grateful for this strange ability.

Acting quickly, Harry rushed off with Sirius's neck gripped firmly in his mouth. Warm blood ran over his tongue and down his lips. Sirius would shudder occasionally and sometimes twitch, making Harry wonder if he was trying to fight off the paralysis. Not that it mattered. Sirius' form was the unnatural byproduct of a potion he and the other Marauders had taken. Unlike Harry's natural animagus form, his had no powers.

The alley Harry eventually rushed into was almost depressingly empty. There wasn't even a dumpster to hide behind. That was fine, though, as most of the people who'd been wandering the streets in this district had run off after catching sight of him.

Transforming back into a human, Harry did not waste time and waved a hand over Sirius' prone form. A pulse of magic, tendrils of arcane energy, spread from his hand in an almost gentle wave, undoing the magic that kept Sirius in his animagus form.

Harry watched impassively as the transformation undid itself. Legs elongated and became bipedal. Forepaws turned into fingers and human hands while arms lost their hair to reveal almost skeletal human arms. What had once been a muzzle soon became the face of a man who, at one point, would have been considered handsome, but now looked worn and haggard, as if he had aged several decades more than he should have.

A frown marred his face as Harry thought about his next move. The man was bleeding quite a bit. A pool was forming underneath Sirius' head, the crimson fluids pouring from where Harry had bitten him like a faucet that hadn't been turned fully off. He couldn't have Sirius dying on him yet, so he needed to heal the man first.

Healing was probably the most difficult magic to accomplish without a wand. Harry could heal himself easily enough, but that was because it was easier to focus his magic internally than externally. All he needed to do was regulate the flow of magic from his center and suffuse it with the intent to heal. In order to heal Sirius, Harry needed to project his magic outward and focus on visualizing the healing process itself, rather than

just the intent.

After he finished healing Sirius, Harry hefted the man over his shoulder. His godfather was much lighter than a man his age should have been. Sirius was clearly malnourished, but Harry didn't particular care about that. It was beneficial. If Sirius didn't have much food in him, he would be more susceptible to manipulation, mind magics and truth serums.

With a loud *crack!* of displaced magic, Harry Potter and Sirius Black disappeared.

XoX

Amelia Bones sat in her office, going over several stacks of paperwork. Ever since Harry Potter had disappeared, she'd been inundated with nearly twice as much work as before. That work had tripled after Sirius Black escaped. So much of the aurors' resources were now dedicated to finding Harry and capturing Black that they barely had enough men left over to keep the peace in magical Britain.

Those two are causing me so much trouble right now.

The door to her office suddenly slammed open and someone lumbered in, the *thunk-thunk* of his wooden peg leg letting her know who it was before she looked up.

"Alastor Moody," Amelia frowned at the man, "aren't you supposed to be enjoying retirement?"

Moody's scarred visage shifted into the approximation of a scowl, which wasn't saying much because he always seemed to be scowling. "I am enjoying my retirement. I'm enjoying it about as much as I enjoy being sidelined during an investigation." The man thumped into the room until he stood in front of her desk.

Amelia set down the report she'd been reading and focused fully on Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody. "I can imagine. You're not the type who enjoys sitting around doing nothing. Just like you're not the type of person who would stop by the auror office for a visit. To what do I owe the honor of your presence?"

"There's been a strange sighting in muggle London," Alastor got right to the point. "Apparently, there's a jaguar running around in the middle of the city."

"A jaguar?"

"Big cat," Mady-Eye answered, "about three times larger than your average house cat, with sharp claws and even sharper teeth."

"I know what a jaguar is," Amelia snapped, "what's a jaguar doing in non-magical London, though? Did it escape from the zoo or something?"

"Negative," Mad-Eye shook his head. "I've already checked my sources in the muggle police department and they say that no missing jaguars have been reported at the zoo."

Amelia leaned back in her chair and regarded the man before her. Alastor Moody was one of the best aurors of recent years. He had put away more dark wizards in Azkaban than any other auror in history, and, unlike most witches and wizards, he knew a lot about the non-magical world. He'd even gone so far as to set up an intelligence network within the non-magical police department.

"Are you telling me that we're dealing with an animagus?" Amelia asked at last, having needed several seconds to make that conclusion.

"An unknown animagus," Moody confirmed. "I checked the animagus registry before coming here, and there are no licensed jaguar animagi."

Amelia took a moment to think about that. Less than a second later, she was waving her wand, sending a missive to her second-in-command, telling him to get his arse up there quickly.

"Have you informed Albus about this?" Amelia asked while they waited for the Head Auror to arrive.

"No," Moody answered, "if it were a matter of some dark wizard terrorizing muggles I would, but this doesn't seem to be the case. According to eyewitness reports and what I saw on the news, the jaguar isn't actually attacking anyone. It's just chasing after some dog."

"A dog?" Amelia frowned.

"A big black dog that looks like a grimm," Moody confirmed. "I suspect the dog is another unregistered animagus, though I can't be sure. It's simply a hunch."

Amelia almost snorted. "You don't have hunches, Moody."

Her words were met by Moody's toothy grin. "Aye."

The opening of the door diverted their attention. In walked a man who looked like someone had crossbred a lion with a human. He moved with a slight limp in his left leg, though it didn't hamper him, and he swiftly made to stand in front of Amelia's desk next to Moody, who he nodded to before focusing on his superior.

"You called, Ma'am," Scrimgeour said.

"I did," Amelia quickly got down to business. "I want you to create a team of aurors and send them into non-magical London to chase after a jaguar."

Scrimgeour actually blinked at that. "A jaguar, ma'am?"

"Yes, Scrimgeour, a jaguar, a big jungle cat. There's apparently one running amok in London, chasing after a dog. I believe it's an unregistered animagi. Your men are to go there and apprehend it."

Scrimgeour nodded. "Very well, I'll have Shacklebolt and his apprentice, Nymphadora Tonks, head up an investigation and apprehension team."

Amelia nodded. Those two were good choices. Kingsley Shacklebolt was one of their best aurors, and he was one of the few who could blend into non-magical society. Nymphadora Tonks, on the other hand, was not only partially raised in muggle society, but also had her metamorph abilities to back her up. They would be perfect in apprehending a potentially dangerous unregistered animagi.

"Moody," Amelia addressed the peg-legged auror. "Would you be willing to travel with Shacklebolt and Tonks to act as their adviser."

"Course." Moody stood up from his seat. "Not like I have anything better to do now that I'm 'retired.'"

"You have my thanks," Amelia said.

As her second-in-command and Moody left her office, Amelia leaned back in her chair and frowned. Something was going on in non-magical London, and she couldn't help but ask herself one question.

Does this have anything to do with Harry Potter's disappearance?

XoX

Nymphadora Tonks walked alongside her superior.

Kingsley Shacklebolt was a rather tall man, standing almost three heads taller than her. His dark eyes scanned their surroundings, studying everything as they walked along the street.

Unlike most wizards who didn't know jack about the muggle world, Shacklebolt was well-versed in how non-magical people worked. The dark grey business suit he wore was of a simple yet elegant design, giving him a very professional image that allowed him to blend in with the non-magical population.

Tonks had gone with standard muggle attire herself. The jean shorts she wore were ripped along the knees, and her band T-shirt had the Led Zeppelin logo printed on it. With her bright pink hair, she looked a lot like a rock crazy fangirl.

Despite how "normal" they looked, neither of them had found out anything about the apparent unregistered animagus that had been spotted running around the city a few hours ago. The few people they managed to question had either not been around at the time, or had been so panicked they weren't able to catch more than a glimpse of the animal as it ran past.

Of course, another reason they weren't learning much could have been due to the person behind them.

Tonks chanced a glance at their "adviser" out of the corner of her eye. Alastor Moody, or "Mad Eye" as he had often been called, looked like someone whose face had been run over by a tractor. What had to be the most disturbing part about him was that fake eye of his, which moved around separate from his normal eye. Sometimes it even spun all the way around until the pupil disappeared into the back of his head. It was really freaky.

"I don't think we're going to find anything out, Shack." Tonk tried to ignore Moody as he thunked along behind them. "We'd probably be better off creating a net than we would questioning these people."

Shacklebolt didn't answer at first, and when he did, his deep voice spoke slowly, as if choosing each word with care. "You may be right. But, I doubt creating a net will do any good now. The last sighting happened a little over two hours ago. Chances are the animagus, if we are indeed dealing with an animagus, is long gone from here."

"Then what should we do?"

"Let's question a few people people before reporting to Scrimgeour for further orders."

Moody clicked his tongue. "I wouldn't bother reporting for further orders. By the time Scrimgeour even gets your report, it's going to be too late. You'd be better off doing this investigation with the assets you have now."

Tonks and Shacklebolt shared a look.

They walked through London a little longer, questioning the people they met. Very few had anything to say other than what they'd been told second hand. One man said he saw the jaguar and dog, but that person, one Geoffrey Crawft, had been so drunk that Tonks wasn't sure she believed him.

It wasn't until they met a woman with pink hair akin to her own that they learned of something interesting, though it had nothing to do with a jaguar.

"I don't know anything about a jaguar," the woman admitted when

Shacklebolt questioned her, "though that does sound strange. A jaguar in London? It's even more unusual than that boy who lives next to me."

"Boy?" Tonks asked.

Victoria nodded. "Strange lad named Harry Evans. He just moved into the apartment next to mine about three weeks ago. Haven't seen any parents with him, which makes me think he might be a runaway."

Shacklebolt and Tonks shared looks of alarm. Three weeks ago was close to the same time Harry Potter had disappeared.

"Do you know anything else about this boy?" Shacklebolt inquired.

"Not really." Victoria shook her head. "Aside from how he seems to enjoy playing 'magic' there isn't much I can tell you."

The word "magic" raised their alarm bells several more decibels.

"What about a physical description?" asked Tonks.

"I guess I could give you that. He's a young man, couldn't be older than maybe fourteen or so. Dark messy hair, emerald green eyes. Boy's gonna be a regular ladykiller when he grows up."

"Did he have a scar on his forehead?" asked Tonks.

"A scar?"

"Yes, there should have been a lightning bolt shaped scar on his forehead."

Victoria reminisced for a second before slowly nodding. "You know what? I think he did, actually. It was kind of hard to see because his hair was blocking his forehead, but I do know that I saw some kind of mark on it." The woman then looked at the two before her, squinting. "By the way, what were your names again? And why did you want to know about Harry Evans? Are you two with child service's or something?"

"Or something," Shacklebolt answered, discreetly palming his wand and

casting a very basic confundus charm on the woman. "Would you mind showing us where you live? We'd like to ask Harry Evans a few questions."

XoX

After arriving at his temporary place of residence, Harry got to work.

He floated Sirius Black over to a chair he had fashioned using alchemy. It was a very basic chair made of steel and didn't look comfortable to sit on. After setting Sirius Black onto the chair, he conjured several chains and had them wrap around the animagus, effectively binding him.

Harry then waited for Sirius Black to regain consciousness. It was a slow going process, as the man appeared to be quite disoriented. He blamed that on how much blood his godfather had lost, but that was exactly why he'd not given the man any blood restoration potions. He wanted Sirius to be confused and disoriented. It would make interrogating him easier.

Sirius groaned several times, eyelids fluttering like drunken butterflies. It took several moments to become aware of his situation, namely that someone was standing over him. His eyes, glazed over to show that he wasn't all there, widened.

"J-James?" the man sounded as groggy as he looked. "Is that you?"

"No," Harry said coolly, ignoring the surge of anger. "I'm not James Potter."

Sirius seemed to gain his second wind. His eyes became sharper as they focused on him more fully.

Seconds later, they widened again.

"H-Harry? That... that really is you, isn't it?"

"It is."

"Merlin," Sirius breathed in shock. "You look just like James." His eyes softened. "All except for the eyes. You've got your mother's eyes."

Harry's eyes blazed with an intense ferocity as he hissed. "Do not mention my parents, Black. You have no right to even speak their name!"

"Harry..."

"And do not talk to me with such familiarity," Harry snapped. "You might be my godfather, but that doesn't mean you and I are in any way close."

Harry's words seemed to hit Sirius like a punch to the gut. The dark-haired man slumped in his seat, several choking noises erupting from the back of his throat.

Harry ignored Sirius and waved a hand at the shelf. A small vial rattled before slowly levitating off the surface and gently settling onto the palm of his hand. The vial had a round bottom similar to a bulb. Sloshing around inside like a fine white wine was a crystal clear liquid.

"Do you know what this is?" Harry asked.

Sirius jerked at the sound of Harry's voice. Looking at the vial, the black-haired man frowned but answered the question. "Um, some kind of potion?"

"This is veritaserum," Harry started, boring a hole into Sirius' head with his eyes. "I am going to give you two options, Black. The first is that you take this serum and answer all of my questions."

Sirius didn't really seem to understand what was going on. He frowned at his godson as if Harry was a puzzle that needed to be solved.

"You... you do not act very much like James or Lily, do you?"

Harry's smile was colder than a Scottish winter. "I wouldn't really know, would I? After all, my parents died when I was just one year old."

Sirius winced. "I guess... you do have a point," he muttered sadly before looking back at his godson. "What's the other option?"

"Should you choose not to go with option one, I will be forced to use option two, which involves me prying the information from your head

using force."

Harry Potter still couldn't claim to be a great Legilimens, but he was proficient enough that he could delve into the minds of others. It wasn't very subtle, and it wasn't very pretty. His mind probes were more akin to a sledge hammer than a surgical scalpel. Chances were good that if Sirius Black resisted Harry's attempt at probing his thoughts, it would break his mind, shattering it into millions of irreparable pieces.

The gears started to turn within Sirius Black's head. Harry could practically see the man's thoughts clearly visible on his face. Finally, after what felt like fifteen minutes, the man bound to the chair shrugged.

"I'll take the truth serum," he stated boldly. "I have nothing to hide."

Harry Potter raised an eyebrow. "We'll see about that."

Harry wasn't gentle as he forced Sirius' mouth open and used magic to pull out the man's tongue, placing two drops on it and then taking a step back.

Sirius' eyes glazed over and Harry knew it was time to begin.

"What is your name?"

"Sirius Orion Black," Sirius intoned in a drone-like voice.

"When were you born?"

"September fifteenth, nineteen fifty-nine."

Harry nodded. That was, indeed, Sirius Black's date of birth. It seemed the serum was working. He hadn't been sure it would work since he'd never been given an opportunity to test it on anybody. There was always the possibility that Sirius was resisting, but considering how disoriented the older man must have been, the chances of him putting on an act were very slim.

"Did you kill my parents?"

"No."

Harry frowned. There hadn't been a single hint of hesitation in Sirius' voice.

"If you did not kill them, then who did?"

"Peter Pettigrew."

It took a moment for Harry to properly compute that answer.

Peter Pettigrew was another one of his father's friends, a part of the group he and Sirius had belonged to, the Marauders. Nicknamed Wormtail due to his animagus transformation, Pettigrew had been best friends with James Potter, Sirius Black and Remus Lupin. He was also supposedly killed by Black when he confronted the other man after Black betrayed Harry's parents.

"How is that possible?" Harry's gaze sharpened to the same keenness as razors. "How did Pettigrew betray my parents when you were their Secret Keeper?"

"I was not their Secret Keeper," Sirius answered, causing Harry's eyes to widen.

"Explain." It was not a question.

"I was too obvious a choice, and we knew that Voldemort also knew this. I knew that if I was the Secret Keeper and Voldemort caught me, it would be all over and the Dark Lord would learn everything. That's why James, Lily and I came up with a plan. We had Lily cast the Fidelius Charm in front of Dumbledore and a few others. We made it look like I was selected as the Secret Keeper, when in truth, Lily actually made Pettigrew the Secret Keeper."

"I see," Harry mumbled as he began pacing. "Yes, that makes sense. No one would suspect Pettigrew of being the Secret Keeper, especially if Dumbledore himself had been present and vouched for you being their Secret Keeper. Everyone would go after you, leaving Pettigrew alone and therefore keeping the location of my parents' whereabouts secret."

It was a good plan, brilliant even. That sort of misdirection was the kind that could, in the right circumstances, turn the tide of any battle. However...

"It would only work if Pettigrew was loyal," Harry turned back to Sirius Black, "and he wasn't, was he?"

"No, he wasn't." Sirius' face trembled slightly as his emotions overcame the potion's effects. Harry frowned. The potion wasn't perfect, it seemed. He would need to fix that. "We had always known there was a traitor within our midst, but we didn't know who. A lot of us suspected it was Remus since he's a werewolf, which is why we chose Pettigrew to be the Secret Keeper instead of him."

Harry nodded to himself as the picture became more clear within his mind. Everything was starting to make sense. There were just a few more questions that he needed answered.

"How did Pettigrew frame you for the murder?"

"After your mum was killed, the Fidelius Charm surrounding your house vanished. I immediately knew what had happened and traveled there to see the house destroyed. I... I found your father lying within the rubble, dead, and then... your mother... she was..."

Harry's lips quickly curved down when he saw tears leaking from Sirius' eyes. That should not be possible, should it? Displaying such intense emotions while under the effects of veritaserum? Then again, this was an emotional subject for Black, so maybe his sorrow was so overwhelmingly powerful that it partially nullified the potion.

Note to self: revise potion as it is clearly not strong enough.

"Someone else got there before me. Rubeus Hagrid had pulled you out the house. I asked him to give you to me, as I felt it was my duty as your godfather to look after you, but he refused. Said that Dumbledore would take care of you. I... I was so stricken with grief that I decided to let him take you. I knew Dumbledore would look after you."

Harry almost snorted. Dumbledore looking after him? That man had

looked after him about as much as his relatives had looked after him.

"I decided to confront Pettigrew. I chased after and eventually caught up with him, but during our confrontation he started shouting at me, asking me questions like 'how could I betray James and Lily?' and then he blew up a gas line, cut off his own finger, and made his way into the sewers. The aurors arrived soon after and I was arrested."

Rubbing his chin, Harry thought about everything he'd just learned.

It made sense. The whole story made a lot of sense. If Harry were being honest, he'd never really been sure that Sirius Black had truly been his parents' betrayer, even if all evidence pointed to the contrary. He'd spent many hours with each of his father's friends, and Sirius had always seemed the most stalwart, the most loyal.

Of course, he'd never suspected Pettigrew either, but that was probably what had made him such a good traitor. No one had suspected him.

Harry studied the man still bound to the chair, eyes glazed over as he remained under the effects of veritaserum.

He believed Sirius' story. He believed that Sirius Black was innocent. Now all that remained was to decide what he should do with that knowledge.

He needed to ask a few more questions.

"How did you find me?"

"I'm your godfather," Sirius said, and Harry could hear a bit of emotion in his voice. The effects of the veritaserum were wearing off, proving that he'd still not perfected brewing it. Not that it mattered. Sirius had already proven himself innocent. "Being a godfather in the magical world is more than just a title. As your godfather, I am inextricably bound to you through the use of an ancient ritual. It allows me to tell where you are at all times unless you're protected by something like the Fidelius Charm. Even then, the bond always lets me know that you're alive."

"I see." Harry pushed his curiosity at this new knowledge to the side.

While he wanted to ask about the mechanics behind whatever ritual bound them, there were other, far more important things to ask. "How did you escape from Azkaban, and why now of all times?"

Sirius blinked several times, then shook his head in a way that was reminiscent of a dog. Harry knew, right then, that the veritaserum had worn off completely.

"Escaping Azkaban was actually the easy part." Sirius grinned despite being chained. "You see, Dementors are great at guarding people because they suck all the happiness out of them. However, they're not so good at recognizing the mind of animals."

Harry was rather astounded by this information, though he did not let Sirius know that. "Of course, that makes sense. Humans and animals have very different thought processes. A Dementor feeds off the emotions of humans, but I doubt they'd recognize the emotions of an animal. That's also how you've managed to retain your sanity, isn't it? You likely spent more time in your animagus form than you did your human form."

"Well, I don't know about 'retaining my sanity,'" Sirius admitted, "but I like to think I'm more sane than most of the people still locked up in that place."

"And so what made you decide to escape now?"

"Two reasons," Sirius began. "I heard that you'd gone missing and grew worried."

Harry supposed he should feel good about that, but honestly didn't care. "And the second?"

"Pettigrew," Sirius growled, his voice almost barking. "The day of my escape, I saw an article in the prophet about a family who'd won a trip to Egypt. The Weasleys, I think they were. I recognized Arthur from our times in the Order of the Phoenix together."

"I know of the Weasleys," Harry stated. "What do they have to do with Peter Pettigrew?"

"One of their sons was holding onto a rat in the picture I saw. A fat little rat that was missing one finger."

It didn't take Harry more than a second to connect the dots. "Pettigrew."

"That's right. Peter Pettigrew is living with the Weasleys, and that boy in the picture, the youngest, I believe he goes to Hogwarts."

"He does," Harry confirmed.

"Right, which means Peter Pettigrew has not only resurfaced, but that he is at Hogwarts, where you are currently attending. I don't know what he is there for, if he means you harm or if he's just hiding because it's all he can do, but I'll be damned if I let him have the chance to hurt you."

And so the last piece had fallen into place. Harry now felt he had the whole picture, at least as told from Sirius' perspective. He knew the hows, the whys, the whats, and the whos. Now all he needed to do was decide his next move.

"Your loyalty to my parents is admirable," Harry said, and he meant it. However... "But I want one thing made clear, I do not need your help or your protection. I am perfectly capable of looking after myself. While I... appreciate the sentiment, you will do well to remember that I am not some child who needs others to keep him safe."

"Yes, I can see that," Sirius said with no little amusement, jangling the chains binding his hands in emphasis.

"Just so long as we're clear," Harry said.

"So..." Sirius wiggled his hands some more, the chains making almost ominous rattling sounds. "Are you going to undo these? They're getting really uncomfortable."

Harry contemplated the request for a second... and then waved a hand at Sirius, the chains dissolving away as if they'd never existed.

Sirius gaped. "You can use wandless magic?!"

"You're just now noticing?" Harry looked at Sirius like he was an idiot.

"Well," Sirius rubbed the back of his head, "I knew that you were capable of doing some pretty neat stuff when you were younger, but we all just thought it was because you were abnormally powerful or something. It's one thing to do accidental magic, it's quite another to do wandless magic."

"True enough, I suppose."

Sirius shook his head in mild disbelief. However, as the situation came back to him, his demeanor became a bit more serious. "What do you plan on doing now?"

Harry tilted his head and considered the question. Before he could answer, however, loud knocking alerted him to someone at the door.

"Excuse me," a male voice called out, "Harry Evans. Is there a Harry Evans in here? This is the... police. We would like to ask a few questions."

"Police?" a female voice sounded baffled. Harry knew that voice, which made him frown. What was she doing here? "Did you really just call us the police?"

"That voice sounds strangely familiar," Sirius muttered to himself. Harry looked at the man, then back at the door.

Harry closed his eyes for a moment and sent out a small pulse, which traveled to the door and acted similar to a sonar. "The people on the other side are all magical. There are three of them. One witch and two wizards. The two wizards have quite a bit of power to the. The witch is Nymphadora Tonks, by the way. This is not good."

"Nymphadora?" Sirius blinked. "You mean my niece?"

"Harry Evans." The knocking came again, louder this time. "We need you to come out right this instant. If you do not, we will enter the premise and take you by force if necessary."

"Yes, it's your niece. She's an auror."

"Oh." Sirius' mouth dropped slightly. "That's not good."

"No, it isn't." Harry's mind raced at several hundred miles a second.

"Sirius, do you have a safe house you can take us to?"

"Uh..." Sirius thought quickly. "There is one place, but I can't apparate. There are runes placed on me to prevent that."

The knocking stopped, but the voice spoke up again. "Harry Evans, if you do not answer this door right now, we'll be forced to enter without your permission."

"For Merlin's sakes!" A third voice growled. "Just blast the door apart already!"

"W-wait!" Another voice spoke up, one Harry remembered from a few days ago. "W-what are you doing?! And what is that stick you're carrying?!"

"My apologies, ma'am, but I can't have you causing trouble. Please forgive me. Obliviate!"

Harry knew that time was running out. It was now or never.

"That's fine. Just open your mind to me and I can get us there."

"What?"

Sirius Black looked into Harry's eyes, and in that second, Harry was able to pull the information from Sirius' mind. It wasn't very elegant, his legilimency, nor was it very subtle. The dark-haired man winced when Harry's mind probed his, grabbing the information within and pulling it out. However, he also didn't resist.

An image appeared within Harry's mind. A home, dark and foreboding, a place of not-so-fond memories. Along with the image, he received a location.

The door exploded and in marched three people. A large man with dark skin wearing a business suit, a grizzled man with a peg leg and a strange eye, and Nymphadora Tonks.

Harry didn't hesitate. He grabbed Sirius by the arm and disappeared with a loud crack.

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. Not sure when the next one will be, but I'll try updating it sooner. Since Ashikabi no Shinobi is finally done, I should be able to write for this story some more.

Also, the second book of the American Kitsune series, A Fox's Tail, has been published. Down below is my book's blurb, which I hope sounds interesting. Anyone interested in getting a copy can follow the links on either my profile page, my blog, the American Kitsune facebook page, or my twitter account. You can also go onto Amazon and simply search the book section for A Fox's Tail. Once again, I would like to thank everyone who's supported me while I write. It means more to me than words will ever be able to express.

Thank you.

Life has finally settled down for Kevin Swift. Sure, he's still dealing with Lilian's zany antics, but that's alright, he's actually starting to enjoy the gorgeous Kitsune's continued presence. Too bad he's in denial. Unfortunately for him, life likes to throw fastballs when you least expect it to, and his life is about to get ecchi—I-I mean, ugly.

A tsundere dressed in gothic lolita fashion...

A boy whose hair is bigger than his brain...

A new enemy that makes Chris Fleischer look like a fifty pound weakling...

Trying to admit his feelings for a certain tomboy...

Not to mention Lilian herself. Yeah, Kevin's got problems, and life can only get more strenuous from here on out. Oh well. At least he hasn't

been turned into a Harem Protagonist.

Grimmauld Place

Chapter 4

Grimmauld Place

I shouldn't have apparated without preparing first.

Harry Potter gritted his teeth as his body became compressed, like he was being squeezed through a tube of toothpaste. This was the result of apparating without proper preparation first. Harry was sure that he could have done this and been fine if he was only apparating himself. However, he'd also taken Sirius Black along for the ride. His magic was now being forced to accommodate for two people, and he hadn't focused his magic as well as he should have—a dangerous combination.

When he finally emerged from his emergency apparition, it was with a loud *crack!* that echoed across the new landscape like a bullet fired from a gun. Harry winced as his feet slammed into solid ground, his legs buckling from the sudden variance in surface density. Beside him, Sirius Black stumbled to the ground, on his hands and knees, gasping for breath.

"Bloody hell, Harry," the older man rasped, "warn me next time you do something like that."

Harry swallowed the bile threatening to expel from his throat, straightened, then dusted himself off as if to pretend he wasn't bothered by what had just happened.

"There wasn't any time to issue a warning. Had I not acted when I did, then I would be sitting in a holding cell right now, and you would have been sent back to Azkaban Prison."

Sirius grimaced.

"Point taken."

"Now, then, where are we, exactly?"

"You asked for a safe place," Sirius started, standing back to his feet, albeit, on shaky legs. "I couldn't think of a safer place than my families old home, though I loathe the idea of coming back here. Harry," Sirius made a sweeping gesture, "welcome to Grimmauld Place."

Grimmauld Place was a dark and foreboding structure, a series of houses that loomed over them. Walls were cracked, the paint was chipping, and the buildings were in desperate need of re-tiling. Vine crept along the walls like insipid creatures of the dark trying to claw their way through the windows. It needed some serious remodeling. The house that Sirius was gesturing toward had a door with the number 12 hanging on its front.

"Not exactly the most stylish of homes, but it will serve my purposes well enough," Harry muttered before he walked up to the entrance. "Come on, Sirius. We need to begin shoring up our defenses. I wasn't very subtle when I apparated us here, and there's a good chance that the DMLE will be able to follow the trail of magic I left behind. We need to have this place set up before then."

"Um, right." Sirius nodded and followed Harry to the door. Because the door was magically sealed, Sirius had to open it for them. Harry followed Sirius into the house, the entrance opening into a dark hallway that was covered in a layer of filth. He wrinkled his nose in disgust as Sirius turned around, arms spread wide in an all-encompassing gesture that seemed both grand and sarcastic. "Here we are, Harry. Welcome to the Black Ancestral—"

"FILTH! BLOOD-TRAITOR! I'LL NOT HAVE YOU STAINING MY HOUSE!"

"Shut up, you old ding bat!" Sirius whirled around yelled at a portrait hanging on the wall. Harry blinked as obscenities spewed from the portrait in return.

The lady within the painting looked a lot like Sirius; black hair, purple eyes, and aristocratic features. However, that was where the similarities ended. Unlike Sirius, who looked in control of his mental faculties, for the

most part, this woman's eyes gleamed with the taint of insanity. Her ugly snarl marred whatever beauty she might have possessed. It was weird. She reminded him so much of Andromeda Tonks that he couldn't help but find her appearance unsettling.

This must be Walburga Black, Sirius Black's mother, Harry determined. Having already studied up on the Black family in great detail, he knew every member of the Black family, and which noble families several Blacks had been married off to.

The lady and Sirius continued shouting at each other, and Harry, listening in with growing irritation, decided that enough was enough.

"*Silence!*" Harry hissed out in parseltongue. Sirius and the lady both ceased talking, their bodies freezing as if his words had trapped them within a pillar of ice. They turned ever so slowly to face him, their eyes wide and their jaws gaping.

"Harry, you..." Sirius started in trepidation.

"You speak the language of the snakes!" the lady in the portrait finished in awe.

"Of course I can speak parseltongue," Harry spat in his best "I'm a noble" impersonation. "Do you not know who I am? I'm the destroyer of that foolish child, Voldemort, who thought himself a dark lord. I am the one who took his power. Now, his power is my power, and you would do well to remember that."

Deafening silence permeating the room. Sirius and the lady continued gaping. Harry gave them both a cold look, then gestured to Sirius.

"Come, there's a lot that we must discuss."

Sirius stood there for several seconds before, with a start, he followed Harry, who walked down the hall to the door at the end.

"You can speak parseltongue," Sirius exclaimed.

"Yes, the fact that I just spoke it means that I can, indeed, speak

parseltongue," Harry spoke with a healthy dose of sarcasm as he reached for the door. Opening it revealed a dining room and a kitchen. Like most of the house, the room was covered in a thick layer of dust, but he waved his hand at the table and chairs, vanishing the filth. He then sat down and turned to face Sirius. "Is that a problem?"

Sirius started, then stopped. He hesitated. When he spoke again, it was slowly, as if he was afraid of upsetting Harry. "W-well, I guess not... it's just weird, I guess. You know, hearing a Potter speak snake-language."

"I suppose I can understand that," Harry allowed. "It is not a Potter gift, after all."

"Was it true what you said back there? You know, about stealing the dark lord's power?"

"Of course not. Don't be stupid." Harry almost scoffed at the notion that he, or anyone, could steal another person's power. "You can't steal another wizard's power. No, Voldemort, in his idiocy, ended up accidentally giving me this power when he fired his killing curse at me."

"O-oh," Sirius flinched at the mention of Harry being hit by the killing curse.

"Now, sit down." Harry gestured to the chair next to his. "If we want to keep from being discovered, then I need to ask you a few questions before I can determine what form of wards should be used to fortify this place."

Sirius did as told, probably too shocked to do anything else.

Too bad another person invaded the kitchen before a conversation could truly get underway.

XoX

Amelia Bones leaned back in her chair as she listened to Kingsley Shacklebolt deliver his report. Standing on either side of him was Nymphadora Tonks, who fidgeted nervously, and the stony-faced Alastor Mad-eye Moody.

"So, let me make sure I understand this correctly." Amelia resisted the urge to rub her eyes in irritation. "You didn't find out anything about a jaguar, however, you did discover where Harry Potter had been hiding. However, not only did Harry escape from you, but he also had Sirius Black with him, and you weren't able to follow them. Is that about right?"

To his credit, Kingsley kept his face completely straight. "More or less. We did try tracking them magically, but the room they were in leaked with magical energy and we weren't able to pick up on their trail because of it. Also, we don't really know if the person who was with Harry was actually Sirius Black, but—"

"It was," Moody interrupted. Tonks and Kingsley turned to look at him, but Moody only had eyes for Amelia. "It was Sirius Black. I can say that with absolute certainty."

"Very well, so it really was Sirius Black," Amelia decided to believe Moody. "That begs a question, however: What is Sirius Black doing with Harry Potter, how did he find him, and what are we going to do about it?"

No one had an answer to that question. There was too much uncertainty about the situation. What were Sirius Black's goals? Did he plan on killing Harry? Was he taking Harry hostage? If so, then for what purpose?

There was also Harry himself to deal with. That was another issue entirely. None of them knew what the young man had been up to, and now he was in the clutches of a madman who might kill him, if the madman in question hadn't done so already.

What am I going to do?

Amelia was exhausted. Her shoulders ached, and her joints felt stiff. There was a brittleness to her, which made her feel like she'd aged a decade in the span of a second.

What should I tell Susan and the others?

Susan and her friends had been worried about Harry. Even though they were trying to move past that and enjoy their summer together, it didn't change how worried they were. Every day they would ask her if she'd

discovered Harry's whereabouts, and every day she had to deliver them the bad news. It was bad enough that they had lost Hermione, but with Harry also missing, it was like pouring salt and alcohol on a festering wound.

"There's another thing that we need to discuss, Amelia," Moody interrupted her musings.

Amelia heard the tone in Moody's voice, and it took everything she had not to stiffen in her seat. She'd heard that tone before. It was the same tone that Moody used when he was hunting dark wizards. Hearing him use that tone now set her on edge.

"What is, Moody?"

"It's about what we found in Harry Potter's little hideout," Alastor grunted. "I think you'll be interested in knowing what the lad's been up to."

XoX

When Albus Dumbledore received a call from Amelia Bones, he had expected many things—information on Harry Potter's whereabouts, or perhaps news that Sirius Black had been caught. If he was honest, he'd been hoping for the former. While Sirius Black was certainly dangerous, his worry for Harry was paramount. Just thinking about the young man, wracked with guilt and isolated from his friends, made Dumbledore's own guilt threaten to overwhelm him.

If only I had been more proactive.

What he had not been expecting was to find himself standing in what could have easily been a dark lord's secret hideout—if dark lords hid out in muggle apartment complexes. That this hideout happened to be where Harry had been living for the past month made that thought all the more worrying.

The room was brightly lit, though the windows had been sealed completely shut. A table sat in the center of the room, and a large cauldron sat on top of it. The cauldron was empty right now, but Dumbledore's mage sight could see the remains of dark magic wafting

from the interior, black miasmatic wisps of vapor that rose from the cold surface. Off to the side sat a desk with notes and books sprawled across its surface.

Dumbledore walked over to the desk and studied the notebooks. They were muggle made, spiral bound notebooks. He flipped through several pages of one notebook and was both impressed and appalled by what he saw there. Alchemy. From page to page, border to border, every single inch of the notebook was filled with information on alchemy. All of it was very advanced, incredibly complex, and extremely meticulously written. Even Dumbledore could not understand half of what was written in there. He knew a little about alchemy but, as his old master had once said, it was not his forte.

Clearly, Harry was the opposite of him in this regard.

However, even if he did not understand everything, he understood enough.

"Homunculus."

The word sent chills down his spine. Homunculi were artificially created beings. There were many ways to create them—potions, large-scale permanent conjuration, alchemy. Different methods of making a homunculus brought about different types of homunculi.

Ones created from conjuration were simply human bodies with advanced permanent animation charms on them. They looked human but didn't act human. They were more akin to robots from muggle science fiction books than people. Albus had made one of those when he was younger once, but because it had been an incomplete casting, the homunculi hadn't lasted very long. He'd never tried to make one again.

Ones created from potions were easier to make, but they were incomplete homunculi. They lacked even the ability to have simple animation charms placed on them. Homunculi created from this method were inert, like a body without a soul, and they would remain so until time rotted them away.

Alchemically created homunculi were considered "complete homunculi"

in that, aside from being compositionally identical to a human being, they also contained what was known as a modified soul. By taking the magic of the one who created it, a homunculi gained a very limited form of sentience. They could act in a manner that was somewhat human, but this ability was also very limited. They could talk and walk and perform simple actions, but they couldn't feel emotions and couldn't make decisions on their own, making them twisted parodies of real people.

While the creation of homunculus hadn't been banned, that was only because the Ministry of Magic didn't know what a homunculus was—and so few people knew how to create one that it didn't really matter. It wasn't necessarily dark magic, but Dumbledore considered the making of life to be dark in and of itself. Simply the act of trying to create life was wrong, a step into the realm of arrogance by those who wanted to try their hands at playing god.

Seeing these notes, learning that Harry was trying to create a homunculus, was worrying. What was he hoping to accomplish by stepping into a magic that men weren't supposed to wield? What did he plan on doing? Dumbledore worried about the path that Harry was taking.

And now Sirius Black is with him.

That was another worry. Harry wasn't dead, that much was certain. However, Dumbledore didn't know what Sirius Black wanted with Harry. The fact that he hadn't killed the boy suggested that there was something he needed from Harry—something that only Harry could do. That Dumbledore didn't know what that something was was cause for concern.

"Albus," Alastor called him over to a shelf filled with vials, "come here and take a look at these."

Dumbledore walked over to where his friend stood. The shelf was lined with numerous vials and tubes, all of them filled with various concoctions, liquids of many different colors, some of which glowed and others that bubbled. One thing about them remained the same.

"These are all fairly complicated potions," Dumbledore mused. "Aging potion, Veritaserum and its antidote, Polyjuice, Draught of the Living

Death... all of these are above NEWT level potions."

"And more than half of them have been banned from being made by the Ministry of Magic unless you have a license," Moody growled. "I don't like this, Albus. Potter's getting into some dangerous magic. Might not be bad or dark, but it will only take a single step before he crosses the line he seems to be straddling right now."

"Much as I'd like to dispute you on this, I must agree." Dumbledore felt like he'd aged one-hundred years just by saying that. "I am also worried about the direction Harry is taking. That is why it's imperative that we find him."

"Aye," Moody said.

Amelia and Kingsley entered the living room from another door. Both of them looked a little haggard, but neither seemed injured.

"Did you find anything?" asked Dumbledore.

"No," Amelia shook her head, "we didn't find a single clue about, well, anything. All of the other rooms are remarkably clean, almost as if Harry had barely used them. The bathroom has a few products in it; soap, shampoo, and conditioner, but that's about it."

"So, in short, all we have is what we see here," Moody grouched, looking less than satisfied. The gnarled man was clearly upset at not being able to find any clues about Harry's and Sirius' potential whereabouts. Dumbledore understood his frustrations.

"It does appear that way," Dumbledore tried to look on the bright side. "We did find a lot of good information here, however. These notes are quite meticulous, as expected from someone like Harry. While I doubt these will give us a clue as to his whereabouts, at the very least, we can learn what he was trying to accomplish here. Amelia, do you mind if I take these notebooks with me?"

"Not at all," Amelia replied. "I was going to have some people from the Department of Mysteries look at those notes, but it might be a good idea to have you go over them as well."

"Thank you," Dumbledore said graciously. "Once I'm finished scouring through them, I'll pass them along to the Department of Mysteries. I know that Croaker would love to get his hands on these."

"True."

Dumbledore waved his wand at the bookshelf. The potions floated into a bag case that Amelia brought with her. With nothing left for them to do, the group left, somewhat disheartened, but also hopeful that they might find a way to save Harry Potter—both from Sirius Black and from himself.

XoX

Harry discovered that a magically screaming portrait wasn't the only nuisance in this house.

"Filthy master... blood traitor master... brings his filthy half-blood into the great House of Black, he does..."

"Oh, great," Sirius groaned, "I almost forgot about him."

Harry stared down at the tiny house elf, who looked nothing like any of the other house elves he'd seen before. While all of them were short, skinny, had long noses, floppy ears and big eyes, this one appeared almost emaciated. He walked with a noticeable stoop. Both his posture and gait betrayed his apathy. Beady black eyes stared up at them, glaring with a tepidness that Harry recognized as the look of someone who'd given up on everything. This was an elf who had nothing to live for.

"Who's the elf?"

"That's Kreacher," Sirius answered with a sigh. "The foulest, most loathsome little thing you'll ever meet."

"Such kind things filthy blood-traitor master says to poor Kreacher..." Kreacher muttered, wringing his hands together. "Mistress would be so displeased by the company filthy master keeps..."

"Mistress?" Harry glanced at Sirius.

"Remember that portrait you shut up back in the hallway? That was Walburga Black, my dearly departed mother and the 'mistress' that Kreacher's talking about."

"He seems awfully devoted to her."

"Well, considering that portrait was the only person he had to talk to for several decades, I imagine he would be."

"Does that mean he would do anything to please her?"

"Uh," Sirius appeared taken aback by his question, "I-I guess so."

"I see," Harry murmured before turning back to the elf. "Kreacher! How dare you shame your mistress!"

Kreacher stopped mumbling mid-sentence, his eyes going so wide Harry thought they might fall out. "Shamed mistress?"

"That's right!" Harry barked, putting on his best "I'm better than you" sneer as he stared his nose down at the house elf. "Look at how filthy this mansion is! Have you grown lackadaisical in your old age? How do you think your mistress feels living in such a disgusting domicile? Where is your pride as a house elf to the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black?! Well?! Answer me!"

"I... I... don't... mistress!" Kreacher fell to his knees, hands gripping his head and a look of absolute horror etched on his face. "Mistress, forgive Kreacher! He hasn't been taking care of you! He's let your house fall into disrepair! Mistress... mistress!"

Sirius stared between Harry and Kreacher for several seconds, as if not quite sure what to make of the current events.

"Uh, Harry?"

"Not now," Harry muttered. "Kreacher, get a hold of yourself! There is still time to do your mistress proud!"

"There is?" Kreacher looked up at Harry, wide eyes staring at him in

unabashed hope.

"There is. I need you to listen to everything I say. If you do, then your mistress will be very happy."

Kreacher nodded his head eagerly. "Kreacher will listen to filthy half-blood's words."

"What did you call me?" Harry hissed. Kreacher's eyes widened. "How dare you insult me. Do you know who I am? I am the heir apparent to the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter! Son of James Potter, who was the son of Dorea Potter nee Black, an heiress to the Most Ancient and Noble Black family itself, and you dare to insult me?"

"Kreacher be begging forgiveness, Master Potter-Black." Kreacher bowed low. "Kreacher is not be knowin' that Master Potter-Black is a member of Mistress's household."

"Now you do, so see to it that it doesn't happen again." Harry quickly shifted gears, returning to his calm facade. "Now then, in order to make mistress happy, here is what you must do. First, this house is filthy. Clean it up. Every room in this house should be spotless, as befitting the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black. Second, I am sure that our supplies are running low. I will make a list of items that you'll need to get. Make sure you get them after cleaning the house. Finally, I'm going to need a list of all the mistress's contacts, people she used to know who will be willing to help the Black family rise to power once more. Can you do this, Kreacher? Can you make mistress proud?"

"Yes!" Kreacher cried. "Kreacher will do this for mistress!"

"Good, then get to it."

A loud *crack!* premeditated the disappearance of Kreacher, who used the house elves' special brand of teleportation to leave the room and begin cleaning. Harry didn't know which room the house elf would clean first, but it didn't matter to him, just so long as the house was cleaned up.

"What are you staring at?" Harry asked when he saw Sirius gawking at him.

"Y... you just convinced Kreacher to clean!" Sirius exclaimed, pointing a finger at him.

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

"Thank you for pointing that out. I would have never realized what I had done if you hadn't told me."

Sirius looked mildly embarrassed by Harry's sarcastic response.

"Sorry. It's just that I didn't think anyone could do that."

"It's not that hard," Harry said. "All I did was appeal to Kreacher's desire to please his mistress. Now, then, we need to begin fortifying this place. Sirius, do you know if the wards are still working here?"

As the one of the Blacks' ancestral homes, Grimmauld Place should have had dozens if not hundreds of wards layered on top of each other. Noble Houses, especially those who held the title of Ancient and Most Noble, would never have a home that could be easily broken into, and noble's like the Blacks were the kind who guarded their secrets zealously. He couldn't imagine them not having a number of powerful wards protecting this place.

Harry became disappointed when Sirius shook his head. "Not anymore. This place used to have a lot of wards, but they've fallen apart after several decades of disuse."

"I see. In that case, we'll need to create our own fortifications. Sirius, do you know how to cast the Fidelius Charm?"

"Um, no." Sirius shook his head.

Harry sighed.

"Very well, then. I'll teach it to you, and then I want you to cast it, since I cannot do so right now." His mother's wand still wasn't working for him, and he couldn't use his own wand because of the trace. "Now, then, the Fidelius Charm is—"

"Wait, wait, wait, wait." Sirius waved his hands back and forth. "Are you telling me that you know how to cast the Fidelius Charm?"

"Yes."

"B-But that's an over NEWT level spell!" Sirius's eyes were practically bulging from their sockets. "Only a charms master like Filius Flitwick, Albus Dumbledore, or your mother could cast a charm that complex!"

"You are asking someone who you've already seen use several complex spells, including an animagus transformation and apparition, whether or not he can cast this spell. Really?"

"Well... when you put it like that..."

"Right. Now pay attention. You need to learn this spell and you need to learn it fast, otherwise the chances of us being discovered here will raise exponentially." Harry coughed into his hand. "The Fidelius Charm is a complex, multi-faceted charm used to conceal a secret inside of a person's soul. It's a highly advanced form of soul magic, even more so than the killing curse. The trick to performing it isn't just waving your wand in the correct sequence of movements. You are literally compressing and imprinting the secret you wish to keep onto a person's soul, thereby extracting information of this secret and hiding it from the very world itself. In order to do this, you need to concentrate on the secret, focus on it with all your being, and think about how you want only the keeper to know the secret. Focus and concentration is the key here. Now, the proper wand movement is—"

"Uh, before we get started on actually trying to cast the Fidelius, there's something you should know," Sirius interrupted Harry, who gave him an annoyed look.

"What?"

"I don't have a wand."

Harry blinked. Then again. Then one more time, for good measure. Then he blushed.

"Oh, that is a problem."

"Yep." Sirius nodded his head.

XoX

Daphne sat at the dining room table, slowly eating a bowl of cereal. It was early in the morning, and the sun still had yet to rise, but she was used to waking up at this time. She'd been doing so for years now and would admit that she rather liked early mornings. No one else was awake to bother her, so she could think without someone else ruining the quiet ambience.

Daphne had a lot to think about.

First and foremost on her mind was Harry Potter, who was still missing. While being with her friends had helped immensely, it didn't change how she still felt like there was something missing in her life. There was a gnawing absence inside of her chest, a part of her that she hadn't realized was there until it was gone. It left her baffled, and also hurt. She knew, however, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this hole had been caused by Harry.

How did Harry become such an important person in my life?

She could easily trace back the moment in time where Harry had become important to her—that night in the room with the Mirror of Erisad. He'd helped her confront an issue that she'd been dealing with for years, not by showing sympathy or compassion, but by giving her his admiration and understanding. More than anything else, his claim that he admired her strength had given her the strength to, if not get over what happened to her, then at least accept it.

However, even though she knew when she had started thinking of Harry as a friend, she didn't know when she'd started thinking of him as something more. That knowledge eluded her.

Or, maybe I'm just deluding myself.

Daphne thought back to that time in their first year, when she'd danced

with Harry at the New Year Galla. She'd never been to the New Year Galla before that. But, she clearly recalled the many other social functions that she had been brought to. She remembered all of the dirty old men that her father had shown her off to, the ones who had sons that he hoped to marry her off to one day. She'd been passed around like a cheap trinket. Her only saving grace was that, due to her young age, none of the old men had asked to "sample the goods." Even in the wizarding world, which she knew from her conversations with Harry was incredibly backwards, pedophilia was a crime punishable by a lifetime sentence in Azkaban.

Harry had saved her from that experience at the Galla. He had appeared before her and spoke with her father. Danielle Greengrass was a cold man, but he was also politically astute. He knew that, regardless of whatever personal opinions he held, Harry Potter had power. Thus, her father had let Harry whisk her away and they'd spent an incredible evening together—one that had actually been, dare she say it, fun.

"Would you hate me if I informed you about how much I long to break your father's jaw against my fist?"

Daphne still remembered his words to her that night. They had not only made her laugh, but they had also brightened her entire world. Those words, while simple and somewhat barbaric, had made her happier than she'd ever been.

That might have been the moment when Harry had become something more—or maybe it was simply the moment where she'd started thinking of Harry as someone who could potentially be more. Daphne didn't know. Even though she had a clear understanding about her place in the world—according to her father—she could admit her own shortcomings. At nearly 13-years-old, how could she possibly understand her own feelings?

"Daphne?" a girlish voice called out, shattering her musings.

"Stori, good morning," Daphne greeted her sister. Astoria wandered into the room, her eyes half-lidded and her hair sticking up all over the place. She'd clearly just woken up.

"M-mornin'," Astoria yawned as she flopped gracelessly into a seat next to Daphne.

"I'm surprised you're awake so early."

"I couldn't sleep."

Ah.

Daphne understood. Astoria often slept with her, but this time, it wasn't just Daphne she was sleeping with. They were sharing a room with Tracey, Hannah, Susan, and Lisa. Daphne found it odd; why share a room when the Zabini manor had hundreds of rooms? However, Susan and Hannah had explained why sharing a room was essential, something about girl bonding time. Daphne hadn't really understood, but she accepted their reasoning all the same.

"Tracey's snoring wake you up?"

"Uh-huh."

Daphne's lips twitched into a smile. Tracey had some of the worst snoring she'd ever heard. It was like listening to an elephant blowing air from its snout.

A plate of breakfast appeared in front of Astoria, a traditional English breakfast. Astoria's eyes lit up some and her mouth watered. Daphne stifled a chuckle as she returned to her own breakfast.

More people arrived as they ate. Blaize came in first, looking as impeccable as always. Terry and Neville, on the other hand, looked bleary and half-asleep. Hannah and Susan came in next, and while Susan seemed alert, Hannah looked ready to fall asleep standing. Lisa and Tracey were the last ones. Daphne watched as Tracey, upon sitting down, practically smashed her face into the table and groaned like an inferi.

"Tired, Trace?" Daphne asked.

"Nngggg..."

"Thought so."

Not long after everyone started eating, Lady Zabini swept into the room looking refreshed and lovely as always—not a single hair was out of place. Behind her, Lady Zabini's daughter, Celia, yawned in an almost unladylike manner, her bleary eyes letting Daphne know that she was not a morning person.

"I'm glad to see that you're all up," Lady Zabini clapped her hands together and smiled. "We've got a big day today, so I want to make sure all of you get ready once you've finished breakfast."

Lady Zabini's proclamation was met with a chorus of affirmations.

Today, they were all going to Diagon Alley to buy their school supplies. Their book list and their list of supplies had come in a few days ago. Daphne imagined it would be crowded today, since most students would be going as well. She didn't particularly enjoy crowds, but she was sure her sister would get a kick out of going.

"What classes were you taking again, Daph?" Tracey asked after breakfast.

"You mean aside from the core classes?" Daphne asked as she put on her black stockings. Tracey nodded. "I'm taking Study of Ancient Runes and Arithmancy."

"Blurg," Tracey made a strange noise. "Sounds like a lot of work. You should have taken easy classes like me."

"You mean I should have taken useless classes like Divination and Muggle Studies?" Daphne rolled her eyes.

Divination and Muggle Studies were, in her opinion, two of the most useless classes known to wizarding kind. Anyone with an ounce of intelligence knew that only witches and wizards with seer's blood had the power to divine the future. Daphne had also studied the course syllabus for Muggle Studies. From her conversations with Harry and Hermione, she had learned that wizards had a very skewed perspective on their non-magical counterparts. They knew next to nothing, which meant

anything she learned in Muggle Studies would likely be untrue.

"Hey! They're easy classes! I can get O's in both of them without even trying," Tracey defended herself.

"What a lazy girl," Lisa muttered, half-sarcastically, half-fondly.

"Oi!"

"I'm guessing you're taking the same classes that I am?" Daphne said to Lisa, who nodded.

"Of course. I'm not in Ravenclaw for nothing, you know. Terry and I are both taking Ancient Runes and Arithmancy."

"What about you two?" Tracey asked Hannah and Susan.

"I'm taking Arithmancy and Care of Magical Creatures," Susan answered.

Everyone looked at Hannah, who flushed a bit. "Divination and Care of Magical Creatures."

"I wish I could take electives," Astoria pouted. Daphne smiled and gently rubbed her sister's head.

"You're still going to take a lot of interesting classes," she consoled the younger blond. "Besides, they don't give first years electives because they want to ease you into the learning process. If you were taking two electives on top of your core classes, you'd be overwhelmed."

"I still don't think it's fair."

Daphne gave her sister an indulgent smile.

After getting dressed, the group of girls met up with the guys in Lady Zabini's private receiving room. The boys were already there when they arrived. Neville and Blaise wore their best outfits, though Blaise looked considerably more ostentatious in his green silk robes. The Longbottoms had never been big on extravagant clothing. Terry looked sadly normal standing next to the other two in his muggle-esque outfit.

Lady Zabini and her daughter were also there. Even Blaise looked plain and ordinary compared to those two. Lady Zabini had chosen to wear her hair up in an elegant bun, a few strands left purposefully undone to frame her face. The robes she wore looked a lot like a muggle dress, black, with a low-cut back that revealed her olive-colored skin, and a slit running up the side that allowed tantalizing glimpses of bare leg.

Daphne didn't want to admit it, but she felt a hint of envy when she saw how the dress wrapped around the woman's torso. She looked down at her chest and felt the pang of slight jealousy grow.

I wish I would hurry and grow up. Susan has larger breasts than me.

She wondered if that was a natural thought, to want bigger breasts. Was she thinking this because of her own personal desire, or did she want to seem more appealing to...

Don't think about Harry right now, Daphne. You can't afford to do that.

"Alright, everyone!" Lady Zabini got their attention. "We're heading out now. Ladies, you go first. Men, you come after us."

"Come on, 'Stori." Daphne held out her hand, which Astoria grabbed. When it was their turn to use the floo, Daphne grabbed a handful of floo powder, threw it into the fireplace, then stepped in and called out, "Diagon Alley!"

Daphne's breathing was even as she looked straight ahead, already knowing better than to turn her head. She didn't stay still either. Walking forward, one hand holding her sister's, she moved closer to the fireplace on her own gumption. Upon reaching the floo, Daphne gracefully walked out with her sister trailing behind her.

The Leaky Cauldron was a busy place, even this early in the morning. People sat around the tables, chatting and laughing. One group sat around a long table next to her, large cups sloshing with liquid gripped within their hands. A trio of witches sat huddled in one corner of the room, smoking from a large pipe. Daphne's nose wrinkled just a bit as the odorous scent of several dozen people hit her.

"It's so loud!" Astoria had to shout to be overheard. She probably wasn't used to so much noise, Daphne realized, since she'd never used the floo to travel to public places like this.

She opened her mouth to reassure her sister—

"It's so cool!"

—when a smile lit Astoria's face like a lumos spell.

Daphne shook her head and smiled. Of course her sister would love noisy places like the Leaky Cauldron. This was her sister, after all, the same one who was loud and easily excited by new things.

When everyone had exited the floo, Lady Zabini ushered them to the back, where they left the Leaky Cauldron. There, she took out her wand and tapped the brick wall, which glowed briefly before sliding apart and revealing Diagon Alley.

"Come along, children. Our first stop is Gringotts."

They moved forward, into the throng of people. Daphne kept a tight grip of Astoria's hand so they wouldn't become separated. Susan and Tracey walked on her left, while Blaise, Terry and Neville strolled behind them, chatting about something they'd read in the Daily Prophet. Lisa and Hannah were up front. Daphne couldn't hear them, but from the way Hannah laughed, she assumed Lisa was poking fun of Tracey, especially since her raven-haired friend was red-faced and fuming.

"Look at that, Daphne! It's so large!"

"Don't go wandering off, 'Stori," Daphne called as the girl tried to pull away.

Astoria merely laughed.

"It'll be alright, Daph! Don't be such a—"

Astoria couldn't say anything more as she ran right in front of someone who, surprised by the girl's sudden appearance, was unable to entirely

avoid bumping into her and knocked the poor girl to the ground.

"Ouch." Astoria rubbed her sore bum, then looked up to glare at the person she'd bumped into. "Hey! You bumped into me!"

Daphne could make nothing of the figure. They were covered from head to toe in a dark black robe, their face hidden behind layers of darkness. Only their mouth and eyes were visible.

Those eyes. Daphne's breath was stolen from her when, for just a moment, she caught a glimpse of glowing green eyes. The moment passed quickly, however, and the man looked away, his eyes no longer visible to her.

"Apologies," the man muttered before swiftly moving away from them, his steps calm and measured as he disappeared into the crowd.

"That was rude," Tracey huffed.

"He did apologize," Lisa pointed out. "And she did bump into him."

"Yeah, but still..."

"You alright, 'Stori?" Daphne asked, helping her sister stand.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Astoria stood up and Daphne dusted her off. "Thanks, sis."

"You're welcome."

Daphne smiled at her sister, then looked back at where the man had disappeared, her lips turning into a frown.

"Something wrong?" Astoria asked.

"No, it's nothing," Daphne shook her head, and the group continued on their way to the bank.

XoX

Knockturn Alley. Home to the seedier side of Diagon Alley. Here, in this

filthy, downtrodden street, where the scent of decay hung thick in the air and the denizens looked like they would sooner stab you than help you, anything you wanted that couldn't be purchased through legal channels was available...

... for a price.

Harry Potter strode down the street, his entire form cloaked in a veil of darkness. Pitch black robes billowed around his body. The spell cast on his hood, a form of wandless enchanting, masked his face and allowed only his mouth and eyes to be seen. He would have also spelled his eyes to glow bloody crimson, but for some reason, magic didn't work on his eyes, just as he couldn't use magic on his scar.

Several people tried coming up to him when he walked in their vicinity, but one glare from his glowing green eyes and they scurried off, their legs taking them as far from him as they could. Snorting derisively, he continued on his way.

Harry's destination was an antiquated shop that had seen better days. Stains covered the front glass window, along with cracks that spread out from a single point, making him wonder how the window hadn't shattered already. Grime covered the walls, blackish and with mold growing along the bottom. A strange scent hung in the air, coming from behind the scratched door, and reminding Harry of decay. He wrinkled his nose.

The door creaked on rusted hinges as he pushed it open. Stepping inside revealed an interior every bit as foul as the exterior. Dirty wooden floorboards groaned as he walked. A cracked and stained ceiling made him wonder if roof might come down on top of him.

The room wasn't empty. Shelves lined the walls, and each one was filled with any number of strange items and artifacts—werewolf hands, a griffin's beak, orbs glowing with dark luminescence. Arrayed around the room itself sat items that were too large to fit on a shelf. A dresser sat in one space, ancient-looking and decrepit, its once glossy finished now cracked and dull. Several feet from him, the remains of what looked like an acromantula lay, inert and unmoving. Harry didn't think it was real—he couldn't sense any magic—but it looked realistic enough.

"Ah," a scratchy voice said behind him, "if it init the youngin'. What can I be doin' fer you today?"

Harry turned around, his cloak swishing, and glared at the man from beneath his hood.

The person who stood before him wasn't old, but he didn't look young either. Lips had peeled back over yellow teeth gums stained black. Sunken eyes peered out from underneath a fringe of muddy-looking hair, their dark irises glimmering with hints of madness. The man walked with a noticeable stoop, his gait halting as if he'd lost a toe and had to relearn how to walk.

"You know why I'm here. Is my wand ready?"

Harry had commissioned this man to make Sirius a new wand. He wasn't as good a wand maker as Ollivander, but then, few wand makers were that good. Ollivander was one of the top wand makers in the world, while this man likely didn't even register in the top 2,000 list.

That was the price one paid for illegally crafted wands. This man was a black market wand seller. He sold wands to dark families who wanted to teach their children how to perform magic before they went to Hogwarts. None of the wands he made were of very high quality. However, all of the wands he made didn't have the trace on them, the magic spell that the Ministry used to detect magic.

"Ah, yes, yer wand is ready. If you'll be waitin' here, I'll bring it right out."

The man lumbered through a door in the back. Harry waited, his foot tapping impatiently. It was a fortunately short wait, and when the man came back out, he was carrying a black box, which was worn and cracked, the wood having long since lost its luster due to age.

"Here ye are."

Opening the box revealed a wand made of dark wood sitting inside. The wood, at least, didn't look to be poor of quality, but Harry could trace the grains and saw that it didn't have the same level of attention given to it that Ollivander's wands had. It wasn't a masterpiece. It was just a wand

that would—hopefully—last until Sirius's name could be cleared.

The man closed the box. Harry reached out for it, but he pulled it back, grinning.

Harry narrowed his eyes.

"How much do you want for it?"

"A hundred galleons."

Harry's eyes narrowed further. Most wands from Ollivander's cost around 15 galleons. His own wand cost 150 galleons, but that was to be expected. His had been custom made with some of the most expensive wand components ever. The wand this man was trying to sell him was made from cheap components that wouldn't last longer than six months, and that was if it didn't see any strenuous spellcasting done to it.

Channeling magic into his eyes, Harry stared the man down. Watching. Waiting. He knew the effect his eyes had on people. Everyone who spoke with him commented on how his eyes had a strange glow about them at least once. That visual effect had been enhanced with his animagus abilities. When he added magic to his eyes, the effects were further enhanced, the glow becoming so bright you couldn't even see his pupils.

The man before him quivered.

"Ten galleons."

"N-now just a minu'e here," the man tried to say, "that's—"

"Ten. Galleons." Harry continued staring the man down. He didn't blink. He didn't move. He merely stared.

The man caved.

"R-right. T-ten galleons it is."

"Thank you."

Harry nodded his head, paid the man his money, and then left the shop. He needed to get home soon. There was still so much left to do.

XoX

Harry took the bus to Grimmauld Place. It was annoying, having to ride a bus when he could just apparate, but there was a chance that someone could track magic emissions and discover his location. He'd been very careful to use as little magic as possible while going out. The last thing he needed was someone like Dumbledore finding him.

Upon entering Grimmauld Place, Harry stepped onto a polished wooden floor that literally sparkled. All of the walls had been cleaned of filth and repainted in silver and green stripes, Slytherin colors. The staircase leading up to the second floor also held the spotlessness of having been freshly cleaned.

"M'Lord, I hope your time out was productive," the portrait of Walburga Black greeted him with a curtsy.

"Productive. Yes, I suppose it was," Harry tried not to scowl. He finished his assigned task, but the replacement wand for Sirius was horrible, so badly crafted that he couldn't even call it second rate. "Have you done as I asked?"

"Of course. I have spoken with Nigellus and he has agreed to keep an eye on Dumbledore for you."

"And, what has Dumbledore been up to lately?"

"He is pouring over your notebooks, it seems."

Harry "tsked." In his haste to escape from the aurors, he hadn't been able to grab anything that wasn't immediately on his person—that meant his notebook, potions, and his trunk were all in the hands of others. Fortunately, no one would be able to open his trunk, and those who tried would be in for a very unfortunate surprise. Still, he disliked the fact that his possessions were in the hands of other people.

I'll have Kreacher get those back for me.

He wouldn't be able to do anything about the notebooks so long as Dumbledore had them, but the trunk should be in the aurors office which, due to its public location, didn't have any wards around it. Kreacher should be able to easily sneak in and grab the trunk and anything else of his that they had.

"I thought I heard you come in," Sirius said as he walked in from the kitchen. "Well, how long are you going to stand there? Come and give your godfather a hug."

"Um, no."

Sirius bent over and clutched his chest like he'd been shot. "W-why not?"

"Lord Harry likely doesn't want to be tainted by you, filthy blood-traitor," Walburga spat.

"What was that?" Sirius glared at the portrait. "Listen here, you bitter old hag, the only filthy person in this room is you!"

"I'm not a person. I'm a portrait," Walburga spoke in a tone that said she considered Sirius to be nothing but a child. "So, I can't be a filthy person. Your time in Azkaban must have eroded what little of your filthy blood-traitor brain was left."

"Stop calling me blood-traitor, you misbegotten, codgerous dingbat!"

"H-How dare you insult me, you disgusting mongrel!"

"Bitter old maid!"

"Traitorous miscreant!"

"Ass hag!"

"Filthy excrement!"

Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose as Sirius and Walburga's argument degraded to childish insults. He knew these two didn't like each other, but really, couldn't they be a little more mature about it? At the very least,

they should save their petty arguments for a time when it was more appropriate.

"*Silence!*" Harry hissed in parseltongue. He'd learned that speaking the language of snakes unsettled people, no matter their allegiance to the light or dark.

It worked perfectly with these two. Sirius's entire body seized up as if gripped by an indescribable fear. His wide eyes and pale face lent credence to the terror he was experiencing. Walburga, despite being a portrait, had also frozen solid. Her gaping mouth and wide eyes were almost funny. However, the disturbing gleam within her amethyst orbs was not.

"I am sick and tired of listening to you two bicker like school children." Harry felt a sense of irony that he, a child going to school, was using that simile. "If you two are going to argue, then do so on your own time. Sirius!"

"Y-yes!"

"Here's your wand." Harry shoved the box with Sirius's wand into the man's hands. "Now follow me."

Harry didn't leave Sirius with any choice but to follow him as he made his way into the kitchen. It looked much better now than it used to. Clean floor, clean walls, and a clean ceiling. The stove and cabinets had also been wiped down, the grime from ages of disuse gone. It was the stove that Harry gestured to.

"Give your wand a try," Harry said. "I want to see if it works before I teach you the Fidelius Charm."

"Um, right."

Sirius waved his wand at the stove. Sparks flew from the wand's tip, making them both wince, but, with a pale flicker, the stove lit on fire.

"Well," Sirius started, eying his new wand warily, "it seems to work... for the most part."

"It will have to do for now," Harry pulled out his own wand. "Now then, I'm going to show you the movements to cast the Fidelius. Afterward, you're going to practice casting it. Our first goal is going to be making this room the secret with me as its keeper. Once I feel like you've gotten the hang of it, you'll cast it on Grimmauld Place. Are you ready?"

Sirius took a deep breath, then nodded.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"Then let's begin."

Thus began a long day, as Harry strove to teach Sirius Black how to cast one of the most complicated charms known to the Ministry of Magic.

Sorry for not updating this in a while. I had a recent streak of inspiration for Devil Ninja, so most of my focus went there instead. I hope you enjoy this chapter. As always, thank you for reading this story.

Acquiring Acquisitions

Chapter 5

Acquiring Acquisitions

The days passed uneventfully. Harry spent most of his time locked away in the Black library, which he accidentally discovered during his explorations of the house.

The Black house on Grimmauld place was not large, but it was big. It also held a lot of secrets; underground passages and rooms, hidden spaces behind walls that could be moved with a password. Certainly, it was not at the level of Hogwarts, but the number of secret areas within the house were numerous enough that Harry was sure he hadn't discovered all of them.

Sirius tried to talk with him, to bond, Harry assumed, but he'd rebuffed the man at every turn. There was no point in bonding with others. This was a lesson that he had already learned. He would help clear Sirius's name, but he was only doing it because his parents' traitorous former friend was living in the world, free. Just the thought of Pettigrew being allowed another second of freedom made his blood boil.

Of course, he couldn't ignore Sirius all the time. The old dog was a loose cannon, reckless and incapable of thinking ahead. If Harry didn't keep him in check, then Sirius Black would likely go off on his own and get killed-or have his soul sucked out by dementors.

It was Sunday morning. There were only three weeks left of the summer holiday. Harry had already done most of his shopping. He had all of the books he needed, plus several extras, and he'd bought all of the supplies that would be required for Hogwarts this year-or so he believed.

He'd never received the letter detailing what he needed to buy. Harry assumed this was because of the Fidelius Charm that had been placed around the house. Only himself and Sirius knew about the house now, as

the secret of its whereabouts had been wiped from the minds of everybody else. Without knowing the house's location, sending an owl to tell him what supplies he needed to buy was impossible.

Harry sat at the dining room table that morning, reading through a book he'd found in Knockturn Alley. It detailed the creation of a homunculus through the use of potions. He didn't intend on creating a potion homunculus, though, since it would only be an empty vessel. That's not what he needed.

A plate appeared in front of Harry; scrambled eggs, turkey sausage and orange juice. It looked much better than the house elf's first few attempts. Harry was glad that he'd decided to teach Kreecher how to cook.

"Here you are, Master," Kreecher bowed to him.

"Thank you."

"Of course, Master. Can Kreecher get you anything else?"

"Not at the moment, no. Go and get some rest. You've been working hard."

"Master is too kind."

With a bow, Kreecher disappeared with a pop.

Harry continued to read, munching on his food. Even though he had no intention of creating a homunculus with potions, the knowledge of homunculi was still invaluable. It might even help him with his own plans.

"NNNNNNNNNN!"

Just then, a loud scream echoed throughout the house. Harry looked up from his book. The yell, which contained the anguish that only came when someone lost what they cherished most, had come from Sirius Black's room.

Sirius, Harry had learned, suffered from nightmares. Every night, the older man would wake up screaming. Sometimes he would scream

names, but most of the time, his screaming was unintelligible. Harry wondered if this was the result of being near dementors for so long, or if the loss of his best friend was what really shook Sirius up.

The screams died down, and Harry went back to his reading. Several minutes later, however, more screaming came to him, this time from the hallway.

"Why can't you be more quiet, dirty mongrel?!"

"Shut up, you old hag! You're the one who needs to stop talking!"

"H-h-how dare you, you insolent fool! This is why you were disowned! You're nothing but a disrespectful cretin!"

"Ha! This coming from the foul-mouthed harpy who disrespects everyone who talks to her!"

Harry sighed as Wilburga and Sirius argued. Again. It was a near daily occurrence, their shouting matches. It had gotten to the point where Harry often went out of the house, just so he wouldn't have to deal with their constant childish bickering.

Like mother like son, I guess.

Standing up, Harry placed a bookmark within his book, closed it, and wandered into the hallway, where Sirius and Wilburga were arguing.

"Bitch!"

"Mutt!"

"Whore!"

"Traitorous swine!"

Their argument had devolved into childish name calling.

"I hope you two finish arguing soon," Harry said. The human and the portrait froze. "I was enjoying a nice book when you two started

quarrelling."

"Ah, H-Harry," Sirius squeaked. "H-how are you this fine, um, morning?"

Harry smiled, but it wasn't a very nice smile.

"I'm doing fine. I was reading this rather fascinating book, when I heard yelling coming from this hallway. It interrupted my reading."

Sirius and Wilburga gulped. They had learned early on that Harry did not like to have his reading interrupted, or his studying, or his experiments, or anything, really. The few times their arguments had gotten really foul, Harry had punished them in the most humiliating manner possible. Not even Wilburga, who was just a portrait, had gotten away unscathed. Harry somehow managed to find a spell that affected even magical portraits.

"So-sorry about that, Harry," Sirius apologized.

"Apologies, My Lord." Wilburga bowed to him. "It seems that, in the wake of hearing my foul son's loathsome screaming, I had forgotten myself. It won't happen again."

Harry nodded, accepting their apologies.

"See to it that it doesn't." He paused. "Wilburga, tell me, has there been any word from Nigellus?"

Portraits were interesting in that, so long as they were connected, those within the portraits could travel to the connected ones. Phineas Nigellus Black, whose portrait was located inside of Albus Dumbledore's office, had a connecting portrait here at Grimmauld Place, which meant all of the other portraits, including Wilburga's, were connected to his.

"There has, My Lord. It seems that Albus Dumbledore is still searching for you and the mutt. Amelia Bones has been seen coming and going from his office several times, along with Alastor Moody. They are still heading the search."

Harry had suspected that they wouldn't give up so easily. Amelia Bones

had an invested interest in his safety, and Headmaster Dumbledore was the type who wouldn't let one of his students go unaided when he thought they needed help. Being the Boy-Who-Lived also meant that, should he not be found, their reputation could be dragged through the mud. The Daily Prophet was already vilifying them for not finding him.

People can be so stupid. As if they could really be blamed for not finding me. If everyone wants me to be found so badly, then perhaps they should begin searching themselves.

It always amazed Harry to see how the sheep responded to what was happening in the world. Whenever something went wrong, they were always quick to blame others for not being vigilant enough. They never took responsibility themselves, as if the idea of holding themselves accountable was antithesis to them.

"Is there anything else that I should know?" Harry asked.

"Just one more issue," Wilburga replied. "It seems there will be dementors at Hogwarts this year."

Harry raised an eyebrow. Dementors were abominable monsters that guarded Azkaban Prison. They fed off the happiness of others, and were infamous for their ability to suck out the souls of humans via the Dementor's kiss. For them to be playing host at Hogwarts was...

"This does not strike me as an idea that Headmaster Dumbledore would permit."

"It isn't," Wilburga answered quickly. "It appears to have been proposed by Minister Fudge, though I somehow doubt that idiotic fool could have thought of this on his own. More than likely, this idea came from Lucius Malfoy."

That made much more sense. Lucius Malfoy, head of the Malfoy family, was a devious snake with a gilded tongue and a keen mind. An idea like this could only come from someone like him.

But the question still remains, why have dementors at Hogwarts? Is it to catch Sirius Black?

The idea didn't seem plausible. Sirius Black had no reason to go to Hogwarts-at least, not any that Lucius would know about. Although, no one knew that Sirius and Harry were together. Perhaps dementors were being sent there under the assumption that he would show up, and Sirius Black would follow him? It was possible, but still not the most viable sounding reason.

"That could pose a problem," Harry muttered.

"Uh, Harry?" Sirius said.

"Thank you for informing me of this. Please keep me posted on anything else that you uncover."

"Of course, My Lord."

"Harry?"

"Follow me, Sirius. We'll need to conceive a plan to counteract this new development."

Harry wandered back to the kitchen, Sirius trailing behind him. They sat down at the dining room table, Harry in front of his meal, while Sirius chose to sit opposite of him. Despite his ashen pallor and sweaty face, the man looked much better than he had when Harry first confronted him.

A meal appeared before Sirius; a traditional English breakfast, along with several potions. Sirius dug into the meal. He didn't touch the potions.

"It seems we're going to have a few more problems than we initially anticipated," Harry said. "We'll need to revise our original plan to deal with this new threat."

Their original plan called for Sirius Black to travel ahead of Harry and journey to Hogsmeade, a small wizarding town not too far from Hogwarts. Once there, Sirius would find a place where he could hide until Harry contacted him again. With dementors on the loose, that was no longer a safe option.

"I fesh sho," Sirius mumbled between mouthfulls of food.

Harry wrinkled his nose. "Has being in your dog form for so long made you forget about manners? Don't speak with your mouth full."

Sirius swallowed his food, then gave Harry a sheepish grin. "Sorry."

Harry ignored Sirius's childish antics. "The dementors are going to be searching for you, which means you traveling to Hogsmeade and hiding out until we're ready to capture Pettigrew is no longer an option."

"Then what should we do?"

Rubbing his chin, Harry thought the problem over. He'd originally wanted to wait until Ron went to Hogsmeade, then ambush him with Sirius and capture Pettigrew. Afterward, they would bind, cage, and then send a fully human and perfectly alive Peter Pettigrew to the Department of Law Enforcement.

Harry believed that if Amelia Bones was given undeniable proof of Sirius's innocence, such as a living Pettigrew, she would call off the search for him. After that, Sirius could turn himself in, and then, with Harry's influence, he would be given a fair trial and acquitted of his crime.

However, with dementors now being stationed at and around Hogwarts, they would need to come up with a new plan. Their old one wouldn't work.

I'll need to think on this later, Harry thought as he glanced at the clock. It was nearing the time where he had to leave.

He was about to stand up and get ready, but he paused when he saw that Sirius had yet to drink his potions.

"Sirius, your potions. Why haven't you drank them?"

The potions sitting beside Sirius's chair were ones that Harry had made for him. When they'd first met, Sirius had been so skinny that he looked like a concentration camp victim. Actually, he still looked like one. Those potions were specially made magical nutrient intake potions that were custom for Sirius. Harry judged that Sirius be back to full physical health after taking three months worth of these potions.

"Hm, oh, yeah, these. Don't worry. I'll drink them. I just don't want to drink them on an empty stomach."

Harry narrowed his eyes.

"You're lying. Drink them now before I leave."

"Do I have to?" Sirius winced.

"Yes."

"But-"

"Don't but me. Drink your potions."

"Don't wanna!"

"Damn it, Sirius Black! Drink your potions!"

"Not gonna do it!"

As the childish argument continued, Harry grew more frustrated, to the point where it felt like his head was going to spontaneously combust. There was a fierce burning inside of his noggin. Pressure around his skull caused him to see red. All the while, a voice whispered into the back of his mind.

A cold blanket settled over him.

"Sirius Black, if you do not drink those potions right now, I am going to shove them so far down your throat you'll be crapping glass for months. Now drink. Those. Potions."

Sirius Black could not drink his potions fast enough.

XoX

Madam Amora's shop looked exactly as he remembered. The cluttered room revealed itself to him as he pushed aside the curtain and stepped into the threshold. Tables and stands covered by magical items littered the floor. Articles of all kinds buzzed and whirled, smoked and bubbled.

Harry still didn't know what half of these artifacts did, but he could feel the magic surrounding them.

"You have returned, child."

Harry turned around. Mada Amora stood in the entryway to the back room. Clothing covered her from head to toe. Dark and heavy, her purple robes were covered in accoutrements that hung from the fabric, decorating what would have been an otherwise plain outfit. Two yellow eyes glowed like twin moons, visible beneath a cowl that covered the rest of her face. As always, the woman carried a mystical air about her.

The woman paused upon seeing him. Despite being disguised using several powerful charms, Harry felt almost like she could see right through them.

"I see that you have faced many hardships recently." She tilted her head. "I shan't ask about what difficulties you have been through. What brings you back to my store, young one?"

"I'm need of your talents," Harry replied, pulling out a small necklace with a golden pendant attached to it. "I would like you to enchant this."

"As expected, but what sort of enchantments do you wish to be placed on it?"

"The kind to make me invisible."

Madam Amora paused. "Invisibility is not an enchantment that can be done easily, or even truly, for it is impossible to render one invisible without the aid of an invisibility cloak. Even the most powerful of invisibility charms do not render one truly invisible."

"I am aware of that," Harry responded. "What I meant was that I would like you to enchant this so that the eyes of others slide over me when they look in my direction, sort of how a warding charm keeps regular humans away."

"Ah, now that is something that is within my power to accomplish," Madam Amora said. "Though it will still cost a good deal of money."

Enchantments like that are powerful, and they require at least a week to prepare, especially if you want them done right."

"That's fine. There are still three weeks before I need it."

"So I see," Madam Amora murmured. Harry felt a moment of discomfort as her yellow eyes pierced him, however, he shoved these feelings aside and stared right back, earning a nod of approval from the woman, who held out her hand. "Hand me the pendant. I shall begin enchanting it within two days time, during the next full moon. That will increase the potency of the enchantment. It should be done before the next lunar cycle."

"Thank you."

Harry handed Madam Amora the pendant. After gazing at it for a moment, the mysterious woman nodded and pocketed the object within her robes.

Harry was about to leave, when Madam Amora spoke up, startling him.

"There are many people searching for you, young one," she started. "I do not know why you have disappeared from the public eye, nor do I understand what it is you hope to gain with these enchantments. I shall not ask either, as it is not my place to know such things. However, please take this piece of advice to heart. It does not matter how far or how fast you run. No one can escape from their own darkness. If you do not confront yourself, and soon, then you may very well lose that which makes you unique."

Harry stood in the doorway for several seconds, his fists clenched.

Are you going to let her speak to you like that?

He closed his eyes, nostrils flaring as he fought the urge to yell.

Come now, teach this woman a lesson. Show her what it means to cross someone as powerful as yourself.

Taking several deep breaths, Harry centered himself.

No, he said before leaving the store and venturing into the streets beyond.

XoX

Returning home after hiring Madam Amora, Harry was greeted to a mercifully silent house. He had expected Sirius and Wilburga to be arguing again, so not seeing them shouting in each other's faces was very much a blessing in disguise.

Entering the kitchen, Harry found Sirius Black grumpily sitting at the table, eating a sandwich, a shot of fire whiskey sitting beside his plate. He looked petulant. Harry wondered if perhaps the man had been fighting with Wilburga and lost, and now he was sulking as a result.

Not that it matters to me.

"Oh, Harry." Sirius brightened upon seeing him. "Finished your tasks?"

Harry sat down, and a plate of various meats and cheeses appeared in front of him. "I did. I've also had a chance to think about how we're going to deal with the dementor situation. I believe I've come up with a workable solution."

"Really? That's good, cuz I've been thinking about what we should do, too." Sirius took a bite out of his sandwich. "I was thinking that I could travel to Hogsmeade in my dog form, and simply stay in that form until we come up with a plan to capture Pettigrew."

Dementors were interesting in that, while they sucked out all the happiness of humans, they couldn't tell the difference between an animal and an animagus-and since they had no interest in animals, an animagus could slip past a dementor with little trouble.

Harry wondered about that. Was it because an animagi's thought process wasn't that much different from a regular animals? It was true that when someone was in their animagus form, their thoughts were a lot different, simpler, in a way. Perhaps the thoughts of an animagi were so simple that dementors simply couldn't sense them.

An interesting theory, but that's all it is. Until I can find some way to test that theory, which isn't likely, there's no way for me to discover whether or not it's true.

There was one way to test this idea: Follow through with Sirius Black's plan by having him go to Hogsmeade in his animagus form. If the dementors didn't give Sirius the kiss, then Harry would know his theory was correct. However, if Sirius did travel to Hogsmeade, and the dementors did kiss him, then everything they'd done up to this point would be meaningless.

"No," Harry said.

Sirius paused. "No?"

"No, you won't be going to Hogsmeade. With dementors now on the loose, you cannot afford to be careless. You're going to stay here while I go to Hogwarts, and only after I have Pettigrew in my custody and the dementors have been recalled to Azkaban, will you leave Grimmauld Place."

Sirius looked like someone had just told him that James Potter had risen from the grave. His face was pale. "You can't be serious!"

"I am quite serious."

"This is going to put you in danger!"

"I doubt it. The dementors aren't looking for me. They're looking for you. If anything, you coming to Hogsmeade in your animal form is going to place me in more danger."

"I'm not talking about the dementors! I'm talking about Pettigrew!"

Harry almost snorted. "Is that what you're worried about? I have been going to school for two years now, and Pettigrew has been here ever since I started. Not once has he attacked or otherwise attempted to inflict harm upon me. This leads me to believe that he has no intentions for me one way or the other. Most likely, Pettigrew is simply disguising himself as the Weasley's family rat to keep a low profile. Weren't you the one

who told me that he's a yellow-bellied coward?"

"That isn't the point!"

Standing up, Sirius slammed his hands against the table. Harry stared at his godfather with a calm gaze, as if unbothered by the older man's agitation.

"Then what is the point?"

"You still don't know what Pettigrew might do! That rat might be a coward, but he's good at looking after his own skin! He might hurt you if it means protecting himself."

"And what would he have to protect himself from?" Harry spread his arms wide, as if to emphasize his point. "No one is looking for him aside from you."

Sirius faltered. "He could... there could be others. You don't know what can happen in the future, Harry! For all we know, something could happen that forces Pettigrew to act. He might be a coward, but he's really good at looking after his own hide."

"Which is all the more reason for you not to show up," Harry said mildly. "Right now, you are the only danger to Pettigrew. If you showed up at Hogsmeade and he saw you, then he'd be liable to take drastic actions."

"That's..."

"Furthermore, Pettigrew knows about your animagus form. I'm sure that he would recognize you in it. This means that you won't be able to travel much. You'll be in more or less the same position at Hogsmeade that you're in here-except you won't have the comfort of a home. You'll be stuck somewhere outside of Hogsmeade, like in a cave or some other subterranean location."

"That doesn't matter! Your safety comes before my own!"

Harry twitched. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, held it, then slowly let it out.

"I appreciate that you want to protect me, Sirius, truly. However..." Harry opened his eyes, which were sharper than a pair of blades. "... you presume too much. I'm not some weak child who needs saving."

"That's... I didn't mean..."

"If anything," Harry continued, "the person who needs protection right now is you, not me."

Sirius grew silent, and Harry knew that he had the man trapped. While there were, indeed, people who were after Harry, none of them were malignant-Headmaster Dumbledore, Madam Bones, the Ministry of Magic... they were worried about his safety, and once he showed up at Hogwarts, they'd have no need to detain him. He might be asked questions, but Harry already had a plan for that.

Speaking of which...

"Kreacher."

"The young master calls for Kreacher?"

"I need a calligraphy pen, a sheet of parchment, an envelope, and a seal."

Kreacher snapped his fingers and all of the supplies Harry asked for appeared.

"Thank you."

"Of course, young master."

Giving a bow, Kreacher disappeared with a pop. Sirius stared at the spot the house elf vacated.

"Why is it that he calls you young master but still calls me filth?" he asked no one in particular.

"Because you still call him shit eater?" Harry suggested as he grabbed the calligraphy pen and began to write. "Perhaps you should consider

treating him with respect."

"Just whose side on you on here?"

"I don't take sides."

"But I'm your godfather!"

"Oh? Are you? This is news to me. Aren't godfather's supposed to take care of their god children in the event that something happens to their parents?"

Sirius flinched. "That was a low blow, Harry."

Harry shrugged and continued writing his letter.

Dear NF,

Thank you for your help last year. I learned a great deal under your tutelage.

I regret to ask this of you, but I was wondering if you could help me once more. I am in need of a pensieve, but have been unable to find one. I would like to know if you have any knowledge on where I could acquire one.

Best regards,

HP

It was a short, simple letter, but Harry knew that Flamel wasn't one for reading long letters. The man had a short attention span for anything that wasn't alchemy or his wife.

Reaching out with his mind, Harry tried to call for Hedwig. When she didn't come, he frowned, then tried again. She still didn't come.

What is going on? I know that Hedwig and I haven't been on the best of terms for some reason, but she's always responded to my calls...

We don't need her anyway. She's a burden, just like everybody else. It'll

only hurt more when she dies. Better to let her go now before that happens.

... Yes, that's right. Hedwig is a burden. If something happened to her, if she died, then... perhaps it's better this way.

Harry nodded several times to himself. He didn't need Hedwig. She might have been able to deliver this message, but there were other ways to acquire a pensieve that didn't involve contacting the Flamels.

He'd been hoping to avoid going there, because he was sure there were guards stationed around it, but it looked like a trip to Gringotts was in order.

XoX

Ragnok was not just the personal banker for some of the most affluent citizens of the wizarding world. He was also a warrior of incredible skill. Having lived for many long years, he'd taken part in the very last goblin rebellion. Although they had lost that war, it was during this rebellion that he had distinguished himself, and it was thanks, in part, to his skills that goblins were granted the right of handling the wizards money.

Sitting behind his desk, Ragnok worked diligently on his reports. He didn't understand why humans hated paperwork. It might take up a good chunk of time to complete, but filing these papers meant putting more cash in one's pockets, which was never a bad thing.

A knock at the door interrupted his task. Ragnok cast it an irritated glare, but quickly calmed himself. No one would be foolish enough to intrude on him while he was working, not unless they had a good reason.

"Enter."

The door creaked open and Griphook entered the room.

"Director Ragnok, there is... someone here to see you."

The way Griphook spoke, the odd inflection in his voice, made Ragnok pause. There was something about this guest that unsettled Griphook-a

rare feat indeed. While the young goblin had never been tested in combat, he had a stout heart. For something to bother him... well, it was unusual.

"Send them in," Ragnok ordered. He would see what made this person disquiet Griphook for himself.

Griphook nodded and left. Not even a minute later, someone else entered the room. Cloaked from head to toe in black, the figure's clothing seemed to soak in all the light around them, leaving the areas they tread gray and dull. The cowl they wore covered their face in shadows, but Ragnok could see vivid green eyes pierce that veil.

"Take off your cloak," Ragnok demanded. "I won't deal with someone who hides themselves."

The figure paused, then, with glacial slowness, raised their hands, grabbed the hood of their cloak, and pulled it off, revealing a head of raven hair and a lightning bolt scar.

"Director Ragnok," Harry's voice was sharp, cold even.

"Heir Apparent, Lord Harry Potter."

Ragnok studied the young man. Much had changed about him. Where once there had been a vibrancy, a life, now there was only darkness. Intelligent green eyes contained a glacial coldness they had lacked the last time they'd conversed, and a face that once seemed excited and enthusiastic appeared to have become hewn in stone.

However, Ragnarok did not care for such things. He was a businessman, and though Harry Potter impressed him, he did not care about the boy's personal problems.

"To what do I owe the honor of your visit? I have already sent you your bi-monthly report. All of your holdings are doing well. We've managed to turn a thirty percent profit."

"I am aware," Harry said, coming to stand in front of his desk. "I am here for another reason. Information."

"Ah."

So that's what this was about. This wasn't unexpected. The goblins were a font of knowledge about certain... black market activities. If someone wanted something found, or they were looking for something that couldn't be obtained through legal means, then the smart ones came to the goblins. However...

"And what is it you are searching for?"

"A pensieve."

Pensieves were magical devices used to store and relive memories. They were quite useful, especially when you wanted to see your own memory from an outsider's perspective, or view the memory of someone else. They were also quite rare. Being a ministry regulated item, and something that only a few people in the entire world could make, finding one for personal use was difficult.

"I know of where you can get a pensieve. However, you realize that such information comes with a price, yes?"

The reason witches and wizards didn't come to the goblins for information was because it cost money. They didn't like the thought of paying goblins. Only the smart ones, who knew that a goblin could find anything they required, came to them.

Harry nodded. "I am aware, and I am willing to pay your price."

Ragnok grinned. "In that case, we have an agreement. It's nice to see that you still know how business works, Lord Potter."

The smile that Harry Potter gave Ragnok was cold.

That expression of his... it is almost befitting of a goblin, Ragnok thought as they got down to business.

XoX

Ragnok did not have a pensieve that Harry could buy. However, he did

know of a place where a pensieve could be acquired.

Diagon Alley was not the only magical community within Britain. While it was most certainly the largest, being smack in the center of London, there were at least a dozen other communities sparsely dotting the countryside. Some of these communities even had shops that sold items you couldn't get in a large place like Diagon Alley.

Items like a pensieve.

Serpent's Avenue was one such place. It was a tiny place, nothing at all like Diagon Alley. There were only a dozen or so people wandering through it. The shops were nowhere near as decorative. They lacked the aesthetic appeal that Diagon Alley had, and the magic in this place was far weaker, which Harry assumed was due to a lack of witches and wizards in treading upon its cobblestone road.

Harry wandered down the road, eying the shops. They were all old buildings, though there didn't seem to be anything wrong with them. Each building showed its age. The roofs were rickety and their colors dull, the walls had minor cracks in them as reparo charms wore off, and some buildings had mold growing along the bottom. He supposed this was what happened to smaller alleys. The lack of massive customers meant they didn't have as much money to maintain their storefronts. It wouldn't surprise him if this place went out of business eventually.

It's a shame, really. Places like this can hold secrets that places like Diagon Alley could never have.

He'd changed his appearance to that of a young man with blond hair, blue eyes and an upturned nose. The robes he wore were nice, but plain. His scar was invisible, having been covered with makeup. He'd also been forced to use contacts to change his eye color, since magic didn't seem to work on them.

The store that Harry was looking for didn't look much different from the other stores. It was a one-story building built in the shape of a square. The walls were made of aged brick. Shades of red gave it a multi-faceted appearance. A glass display was next to the door, showcasing a variety of used brooms and other magical appliances. Above the door was the

store's name: *Mickie's Used Magical Appliances*.

He walked into the store. Isles greeted him-isles containing any number of odds and ends, knick knacks, some that he'd seen and some that he hadn't. There was a lot of variety in this store, more so than other stores he'd been into.

Used shops like this always have a wider selection, but their items aren't as new. It's a trade off, I suppose.

"Welcome to my shop," a man greeted as he walked in. Harry gave the person credit. They only faltered a little when his eyes landed on them. "What can I get for you, young man? I've recently got a new broom cleaning kit straight off the market. It was quite the find, if I do say so myself."

"I am not here for broom cleaning kits," Harry said. The shop owner flinched. "I am looking for something a little more esoteric and difficult to acquire than a mere broom cleaning kit."

"S-so I see." The man took a hesitant step back. "What exactly are you looking for, then?"

"I have been told that you have a pensieve currently within this shop. I would like to buy it from you."

It was interesting to see the look of shock etch itself upon the man's face. Skin became ashen pale as his eyes widened.

"I-I don't-"

"Please do not say that you don't know what I'm talking about, when you clearly do know what I'm talking about." Harry stared at the man, who'd broken out into a minor sweat. "I do not enjoy being lied to."

The man's shoulders slumped. "How did you find out about that?"

"Why did you try to hide that you had it?" Harry returned with a smile. The man's eyes widened. "Oh, dear. Could it be that you have an unregistered pensieve in your possession? You do know that's illegal,

don't you?"

Pensieves were ministry regulated items. To own, buy, or sell one, a person needed to get ministry approval, which required paying a fee for a certificate and signing a magically binding contract. Not having a certificate could earn someone a several month stay in Azkaban Prison—that was how serious an offense this was considered.

"Look... I got this by accident," the man started, rubbing the back of his neck. "I didn't even know what it was until after I got it. I don't want any trouble."

"Then you'll let me buy it off you?" Harry said.

The man grimaced. "I suppose I have no choice."

Harry smiled. "I'm glad we understand each other."

On Harry's demand, the man went into the back and came back carrying a large box. The fact that he wasn't floating it, and was instead struggling to carry it, told Harry that it was most likely the pensieve. As a powerful magical artifact, any spell cast on it was negated. This included levitation charms.

"Please set the box down," Harry instructed. "I would like to look at the contents... to make sure the pensieve works, you understand."

"Right," the shop owner seemed resigned to his fate.

Harry opened the box and peered inside. Resting within the box was a large bowl-shaped object. Gray sediment lent it a dull appearance, but that didn't fool Harry, who could feel the magic swirling around it. Lining the inside of the pensieve, several hundred runes were engraved upon its surface, esoteric symbols that not even he could make complete sense of.

There didn't appear to be any cracks upon a cursory glance. He would need to take it out of the box to do a more thorough search, but this was definitely a pensieve and, from the magic coming off it, it was still in working order.

This will work.

"How much do you want for the pensieve?" Harry asked.

"E-excuse me?"

"Pensieves normally cost around twenty-thousand galleons, correct?"
Harry pulled out his bag of money. "Will twenty-five thousand be sufficient?"

"Um, y-yeah, that should work fine."

Harry nodded and pushed the bag into the man's hand. Then he took out his wand.

"Now, then, let's finish this deal off with a proper magical vow to ensure our continued security. After all, it wouldn't do if we could reveal each other's secrets yes?"

Harry smiled at the man, who looked like he'd just swallowed a lemon.

XoX

Sirius frowned as he stood in the doorway of Harry's bedroom. It was, like all the bedrooms here, decked out in the green and silver of Slytherin. No matter how many times he demanded the color be changed, that blasted house elf refused to listen to him. Kreacher might have listened to Harry, but his godson didn't seem to care about the color scheme like he did.

"So, I really can't come with you?"

"Of course not," Harry said. "We've already been over this. Not only would you coming to Hogsmeade put you in more danger, it would put me in danger, too. Until this situation is resolved and dementors are called back, you need to stay here."

Harry packed his supplies in the new trunk that he'd bought. Sirius didn't know half of the stuff his godson was putting in there. One of the objects even looked like a giant stone bowl!

He's nothing at all like I expected him to be.

Granted, Sirius didn't know what he'd been expecting when Harry saw him that time in the alley. However, it certainly hadn't been this boy, who seemed to be filled with darkness and pessimism. This young man acted nothing like James or Lily.

I wonder if that's my fault?

Sirius knew about Harry's personal life. The boy didn't say anything, but he remembered the one and only time he'd ever met Petunia. If the woman had acted like he remembered, then Harry's home life must have been horrible. That he was still sane stood as a testament to the boy's will.

What would have happened if he, Sirius, had not gone off and gotten himself arrested? Would he have raised Harry, granting the boy a chance to live a better life? Probably.

Come on, Sirius! Buck up! You might not have been there for Harry back then, but you can be here for him now!

"I won't try to stop you," Sirius said. "If there's one thing you and your parents have in common, it's your stubbornness, and Merlin knows I could never stop them when they decided on something."

Perhaps it was his imagination, but Sirius thought he saw a smile on Harry's face. He blinked and it was gone. He must have been seeing things.

"I'm glad to hear that. This will work out for the best anyway. It would be a pain for you to keep hidden in Hogsmeade. Knowing you, you'd try to go after Pettigrew yourself and have your soul sucked out."

Sirius winced. "That's a mean thing to say about your godfather."

"That doesn't make it any less true."

He's got me there.

"Look, just promise me you'll be careful, okay?"

Harry stopped packing. Slowly, he turned to Sirius, regarding him with those cold eyes. Sirius tried not to shiver, but it was difficult. Harry's eyes reminded him so much of the killing curse, glowing green with an almost deathly cold, that a chill ran down his spine.

"Your concern is appreciated, but you needn't worry about me, Sirius. I will be taking every precaution in my dealings at Hogwarts this year." Harry turned back to the trunk and finished packing. "There will be no screw ups."

Sirius watched Harry for a little while longer, but the guilt of knowing that Harry acted like this because of him became too much, and he soon left the young man to finish his packing.

I'm sorry, James, Lily. This is all my fault.

Sirius marched up to his room, closing the door behind him and walking over to the desk. An object sat upon the dark mahogany table, glimmering as light reflected off its surface. He grabbed it and brought it to his face, staring at his own reflection.

But I swear to you, I won't let Harry go it alone anymore. From here on out, I'll be the godfather that I always should have been.

On that night, Sirius Black made a vow.

Unfortunately, he didn't know how well he'd be able to keep that vow.

Life, after all, rarely works out as planned.

Have you guys missed this story? I apologize for not updating in so long. Honestly, it's very difficult keeping up with every story I'm writing right now. I'm beginning to regret writing for so many fanfics. In either event, I hope you enjoyed this story.

Oh! Before I forget. Any of you who have an account on Goodreads can earn a chance to win a signed copy of my third book, A Fox's

Maid. I'm not allowed to give links on here, I'm afraid, but if you go onto Goodreads and search for A Fox's Maid, you can sign up and enter. The competition starts in 6 days.

Thank you all for reading this story.

The Dispiriting Train Ride

Chapter 6

The Dispiriting Train Ride

That morning, Daphne and the others woke up early to get ready for the trip to Hogwarts. Fortunately, they had already packed their belongings, so after eating breakfast, they were able to leave without worrying about whether or not they had everything ready.

While many families arrived at King's Cross the non-magical way via the portal between platforms nine and ten, the students who belonged to noble families took the floo to King's Cross. This had been done to appease the noble families who didn't want to sully their children with the presence of muggles. Using the floo was also much faster.

As Daphne stepped onto platform nine and three-quarters, she glanced at Astoria. A smile blossomed on her lips. Her sister was staring at everything with the wide eyes of an enthusiastic child. Astoria's awed gaze seemed to be taking all of the wonders around her, and her head turned this way and that, as if trying to memorize every aspect of this moment.

"So cool..."

Daphne shook her head. She didn't know where her sister had picked up that bit of muggle terminology-all evidence pointed towards Tracey-but phrases like that seemed to come from her more often these days. It was kind of cute, but she really hoped their father never heard Astoria talk like that.

"Doesn't look that different from last year, does it?" Tracey asked as she stepped up to the sisters.

"No, it doesn't," Daphne agreed. "And yet, it feels so very different from last year."

"Yeah..."

There was no need to extrapolate. Tracey knew what she was talking about without her having to say a thing.

"Are you excited for classes, Astoria?" Lisa asked.

"Not really," Astoria admitted. "But I am excited to be going to Hogwarts. I've always wanted to go, and I really want to learn magic!"

Lisa smiled. Behind her, Blaize, Terry, and Neville shared a grin.

"It's good to see that she's so lively," Neville said.

Blaize nodded. "We're going to need someone like her around."

"I'm just glad she's enthusiastic but respectful-unlike Tracey."

"What was that, Boot?! You trying to start something?!" Tracey shouted, shaking her fist at him.

"Now, now, children, settle down," Lady Zabini said in a placating manner. "There is no need to get so riled up this early in the morning. Save that for when you are at school."

Tracey and Terry grew silent. Even then, they continued to glare at each other. Daphne and Lisa shared an exasperated look.

"Do you see them yet, Sue?" Hannah asked her fellow Hufflepuff, who was surveyed the crowd, looking for something-or rather, looking for someone.

"Not yet," Susan muttered, squinting her eyes. "It's hard to find anybody in this-ah! I've found them!" Raising her left hand, she waved while cupping her right hand to her mouth and shouting, "Auntie! Mr. and Mrs. Abott!"

At the sound of their names being called, the three adults looked over at the group of children, then began pushing their way through the crowd. Daphne watched with a small sense of longing as the Abott's joyfully

greeted their daughter and Madam Bones gave her niece a hug. She wished her father was more like those three.

I wish Mother was still here. We'd still be a happy family if she was.

"There's Mum and Dad!" Tracey's parents also arrived, and she followed her friend's example, waving the pair down while shouting at the top of her lungs. "Mum! Dad!"

"Tracey!" Mr. Davis bellowed as he walked up to them, wearing a large grin on his face and his arms spread wide, as if preparing to hug the girl. "How are you, my-"

"Mum!" Tracey bypassed her dad and went straight into Mrs. Davis's arms. Her dad stood stock still for a second, then he slumped over. Daphne could've sworn she saw a dark storm cloud hanging over his head, but she chalked it up to her imagination.

"Oh, my goodness!" Mrs. Davis laughed. "Hello, Trace. How has your summer been? Good, I hope."

"It's been awesome!" Tracey said with a grin.

"Awesome, is it? That's good to hear."

"I get no love," Mr. Davis complained as Tracey and her mom shared a greeting.

"Oh, come off it, Dad," Tracey grinned. "You know that mums are supposed to get more love than dads. That's how it goes."

"You say that now, but I remember a time when you were a regular daddy's girl. You would always sit on my lap and tell me how much you loved me. Ah, I miss those times."

"S-shut up!" Tracey's cheeks flushed pink. "I thought I told you to never talk about that!"

"Did you? I must have forgotten. I guess that's what happens when us fathers don't get any love."

"All right. All right." Tracey hugged her father. "There. You happy now?"

"Yes," Mr. Davis said as he hugged back.

Mrs. Davis giggled into her hand. "So easy to please, dear."

More parents soon arrived. Terry was greeted by his family, Lisa's parents and sister came over (and Lisa's sister complained about not being able to see Harry Potter, which brought the mood down a bit), and Neville's grandmother eventually stalked up to them with a surly expression. It was the Dowager Longbottom who captured Daphne's attention, mostly because of the strength of her presence, but also because of how she glared at Lady Zabini.

"Augusta!" Lady Zabini said with so much good cheer that Daphne couldn't tell if she was being genuine or sarcastic. "It's so good to see you! I hope you have been well. I was afraid that you wouldn't show up due to your old age."

The Dowager Longbottom couldn't have looked more stern. "Surely, you had not expected me to let my grandson go off to Hogwarts without giving him a proper farewell, did you? I know that you do not understand matters of the heart very well, but please try to remember that some of us actually care about our progeny."

"Oh, indeed. I understand very well, Augusta." Lady Zabini's smile grew wider. Daphne shivered. For reasons she couldn't explain, that expression frightened her. "After all, my own son is currently going off to a place where I cannot follow."

The Dowager Longbottom snorted. "And I am sure that tears you apart on the inside."

As the two traded snipes, Daphne could not help but picture two animals vying for dominance. The Dowager Longbottom was much like a lioness, fierce and prideful. Lady Zabini reminded her of a dragon, powerful yet cunning. They both had a presence that demanded attention, and attention was what they got.

Daphne looked around and saw that many people had stopped what they

were doing, and they were now watching the verbal spar taking place. Several people were even taking pictures. Daphne could've sworn she saw a Daily Prophet reporter snapping photos.

Realizing that if something wasn't done soon, she and the others would never be able to leave without feeling ashamed, Daphne grabbed Neville's and Blaize's attention, then gestured to their quarreling family members. They looked at their parent and guardian respectively, then her, then each other. Slowly, they nodded.

"Gran," Neville said.

"Mother," Blaize said at the same time.

"We're going to hop on the Hogwarts Express now," Neville added.

"We'll see you for the hols, Mother."

The two women stopped arguing in favor of saying goodbye.

"Have a good time at Hogwarts, Neville."

"Stay safe, and remember, never let others take advantage of you-"

"Always take advantage of others," Blaize finished. "Yes, Mother. I know."

"Good boy." Lady Zabini patted her son on the head while the Dowager Longbottom wrinkled her nose in disgust.

After saying their goodbyes, the group of friends entered the train and found an empty compartment. Tracey, being the best at casting charms, used the Expansion Charm. After the train compartment had been expanded, growing to at least twice it's regular size, they all sat down.

Daphne sat near the window, with Astoria sitting right next to her. As the others began to talk, she drifted into her own world.

She wondered what this year would bring. So many things were different from the past two years, and she was not just thinking about Harry's disappearance. Her life had changed dramatically since her second year

at Hogwarts. Thanks to Susan, she and her sister had the leash that their father had tethered to them loosened. While it was not true freedom, Daphne still marveled at how different it felt.

And yet...

And yet there was an underlying sense of tension in everything they did, she and her friends. So many things had happened during the summer; Sirius Black's escape from Azkaban, the dementors coming to Hogwarts, and, of course, Harry Potter's disappearance. Any one of those three factors could change Wizarding Britain dramatically. All three of them happening at the same time had sent ripples through the wizarding world.

I feel so apprehensive...

Daphne would not deny that she was worried. Indeed, she was petrified by what could happen this year. The past two years at Hogwarts had been fraught with danger; trolls, Philosopher's Stones, the Heir of Slytherin, and Hermione's death. What would this year bring? Would she be able to keep her sister and her friends safe?

"Daphne! Daphne!" Astoria forced Daphne to divert her attention back to the outside world.

"What is it, Stori?"

"Do you want to play Exploding Snaps with us?"

Staring at her sister's wide eyes and joyful smile, Daphne didn't need much deliberation to make a decision. Her lips curved as she said, "I'd love to."

Daphne joined her friends as they played exploding snaps. She didn't converse much, but that was in her nature, and everyone had grown used to how quiet she was.

As the game progressed, Tracey lost more often than not and much to her dismay. Everyone would laugh as she made a fool of herself, then Terry would say something snide, and they would begin arguing. Lisa would bop Tracey on the head, chide her, then the process would repeat

itself. It was fun, Daphne would admit, and Astoria certainly enjoyed herself, if the girl's constant laughter said anything, which was all that mattered to her.

Eventually, Exploding Snaps became boring. That was when Lisa brought out a non-magical board game called *Monopoly*. It was an interesting game, but there weren't enough pieces for everyone. With only six pieces available, Neville, Tracey, Lisa, Astoria, Hannah, and Terry played while the others sat back.

Susan exchanged seats with Astoria, who wanted a better spot to play. Sitting down next to Daphne, the redhead gave her friend a compassionate look. "You've been awfully quiet-more so than usual. Is something wrong?"

Daphne would've wondered how Susan could tell that she was apprehensive, but she'd learned not to underestimate the Hufflepuff. Despite her shy nature, or perhaps because of it, Susan was quite observant.

"I've just been wondering if..."

"If Harry is going to be at Hogwarts," Susan finished in a whisper after Daphne trailed off.

"... Yes."

It was not something they openly talked about anymore. Harry Potter. Their friend. Daphne tried not to mention him for the sake of the others, but when she was alone, especially at night, her mind would wander to him, and she'd worry. Was he okay? Would she see him again? What was he doing? These questions and more would invade her mind. Her sleep would be troubled, her dreams filled with his back as he walked away from her. She'd scream out to him and run to try and catch up, but no matter what she did, it always ended the same way-her waking up in a cold sweat, and Harry nowhere in sight.

"I don't really know if Harry is going to be coming back to Hogwarts," Susan admitted. "I don't think anyone can know what he's thinking right now. But, even if he doesn't come back, all of us are in this together." The

redhead placed her hand over one of Daphne's. "If you need help, just ask, okay?"

Daphne was surprised. The Susan of second year was shy and didn't talk much. In contrast, this Susan, who went out of her way to help her friends, seemed as courageous as any Gryffindor. For the life of her, she couldn't figure out when this changed had occurred.

When did Susan become more than a wallflower?

"I will do that," Daphne said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Susan beamed at her. "Of course, if I'm in trouble, I hope I can count on you to help me as well."

"Of course." Daphne placed a hand over Susan's. "I promise."

Her worry abating slightly, Daphne realized how lucky she was to have such good friends.

Harry Potter sat on the ground in his compartment.

It hadn't taken much to slip onto the Hogwarts Express unnoticed. While he'd been tempted to apparate to Hogwarts and sneak in through one of the passages, Harry wasn't certain enough in his ability to remain undetected to risk it. Humans, even magical ones, he could easily slip past. Dementors, however, were not something that he had experience with. Yes, it was better to be safe than sorry in this instance.

Scattered across his compartment were several notebooks, all of them containing advanced notes on alchemy. While he didn't necessarily need the notes, as everything he learned was imprinted within his memories, he found that having notes helped him compare circles. It was a way of alleviating the mental stress that came from calling up two or more informational references, thus allowing him to get work done faster.

The current circles were all on the creation of a homunculus-a true homunculus and not those defective versions that potions and spells created. Each transmutation circle was highly advanced, incredibly

complex, and would require hours to properly draw. The dynamics between the lines that transmitted power and the symbols that contained power were far beyond the sum of their individual components. Most people would have never been able to understand these notes, not even many a would-be alchemist. Flamel would, but that man was scary good at alchemy.

This circle would offer more stability to the homunculus, but it's downside is that it would require a piece of my soul to create. Meanwhile, the one that invokes the five elements would only be capable of creating a homunculus that lasts for a few weeks, but it comes with less drawbacks and doesn't require a piece of my soul. The third one, which involves using the Three Essential Principles, would be the easiest to create in theory, but the most difficult to do right.

The problem with creating a homunculus was several fold. The first issue was the matter of gaining the material necessary to create a human body. The average 70 kg adult human body contained approximately 7×10^{27} atoms and at least detectable traces of 60 chemical elements. About 29 of those elements were thought to play an active role in life and health in humans.

The relative amounts of each element varied by individual, mainly due to differences in the proportion of fat, muscle, and bone in their body. Persons with more fat had a higher proportion of carbon and a lower proportion of most other elements.

The adult human body averaged at 53% water. This varied substantially by age, sex, and adiposity. In a large sample of adults of all ages and both sexes, the figure for water fraction by weight was found to be $48 \pm 6\%$ for females and $58 \pm 8\%$ water for males.

Water is 11% hydrogen by mass but 67% hydrogen by atomic percent, and these numbers along with the complementary percent numbers for oxygen in water, are the largest contributors to overall mass and atomic composition figures. Because of water content, the human body contains more oxygen by mass than any other element, but more hydrogen by atom-fraction than any element.

After learning all of this, Harry had discovered that the average human being contained the elemental compounds of Oxygen (65%), Hydrogen (10%), Carbon (18%), Nitrogen (3%), Calcium (1.5%), Phosphorus (1%), Potassium (0.25%), Sulfur (0.25%), Sodium (0.15%), Chlorine (0.15%), Magnesium (0.05%), Iron (0.006%), Fluorine (0.0037%), Zinc (0.0032%), Copper (0.0001%), Iodine (0.000016%), Selenium (0.000019%), Chromium (0.0000024%), Manganese (0.000017%), Molybdenum (0.000013%), and Cobalt (0.0000021%).

Of course, this was just the elemental composition. There were still two components that Harry didn't know how to replicate: Magic and the soul.

Magic would be easier to supply. He could just use his own. The problem was that he didn't know if his magic would work to create what he wanted. Would the magic of one person transmute into someone else's magic? He wasn't sure. This was territory that had never been touched before. Nicolas Flamel might have the answers he sought, but Harry didn't want to ask him for help.

Of course, the biggest problem is not going to be magic.

The biggest issue was the soul. If the human body was composed of various chemical compounds, then what was the human soul made of? Harry didn't have a clue. It wasn't like the human soul could be broken down and analysed.

That was the biggest issue he had currently. None of his circles were capable of transmuting a human soul. He didn't know if there was a transmutation circle that could transmute a soul, or if a human soul was even transmutable. If that was indeed the case, and human souls could not be transmuted, then this entire endeavor might prove futile.

No. He shook his head. I can't think like that. This will work. I'll make it work.

Even if he was determined to make this work, he still didn't know how he'd go about doing that. Harry didn't know if the Philosopher's Stone was even capable of transmuting a soul.

Soul Magic was a forbidden branch of magic. It wasn't even regulated by

the Ministry of Magic. People were not allowed to touch it. This was due to how most Soul Magic was used in the Dark Arts. Anyone who was caught practicing Soul Magic would not only be sent to Azkaban, but they would have their magic permanently sealed-a punishment that had not been done for the last 500 years.

Because it was forbidden, text on Soul Magic was scarce. Harry had searched all of the places where he thought he might find something, but even in places like Knockturn Alley, books on Soul Magic were nonexistent.

I guess I'll be going in blind.

Right now, all he had were half-formed ideas. They couldn't even be called theories. Harry disliked experimenting without having a working hypothesis, but considering he was traveling into uncharted waters, there was little choice but for him to continue working regardless.

Rubbing his eyes, Harry decided to get a little rest before working on another project. His eyes were sore from staring at paper for the past several hours.

He gathered up his notes, placed them in his new trunk, then locked it. Stretching his arms above his head, Harry started to sit down, but he was stopped from doing so when the Hogwarts Express screeched to a halt.

What's going on?

Harry looked out the window. Rain splattered against the glass, but with his enhanced vision, he looked past that and peered out at the world beyond. There wasn't much to see. They were in an area of England that was pretty much all open space. Nothing existed except for trees and prairies.

Why do I feel so uneasy?

The air had grown unnaturally cold, and his breath came out as a fine mist. Ice crept along the glass, slowly expanding like the tendrils of an abominable horror. The frost moved too fast to be natural.

Something is out there.

Harry could sense multiple magical presences. They were unlike anything he'd ever felt. He didn't know what they were, but even though he could not see them, he could feel the drain on his mental strength. It felt like all the happiness had suddenly disappeared, leaving him empty.

What is this?

Frowning, Harry flicked his wrist, launching his wand into his hand. The wand that had been created by Ollivander appeared different than before. No longer a light brown, now the wand was black with white streaks running through it. The runic symbols remained the same, but they glowed a dark crimson, as if they'd been soaked in blood.

The lights flickered and suddenly went out. Even so, Harry could see just fine. Looking at the window, his glowing green eyes, cat-like and vibrant, were reflected back at him.

"HARRY!"

A female voice screamed. Harry jerked around to see where the voice had come from, but there was no one there. It was just him.

Rattling from behind him made Harry spin around. The door shook against its frame, the handle jostling like someone was trying to open it. He frowned. No one should even be able to see this door. Harry had placed a very powerful series of spells on it, including a variation of the Notice Me Not charm.

The rattling soon stopped. Harry waited for several seconds, and when nothing happened, he exhaled heavily.

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off!"

*"Fool, you think you can defeat me without your wand? Avada
Kadavera!"*

Harry jumped when more voices spoke up. This time, he realized that they were not coming from anyone in the real world. These voices were

inside of his head. They came from his mind, from his memories.

A door burst open. Chunks of wooden splinters sprayed the ground as a man walked in, pale faced and gaunt.

Images flitted through his mind. Memories that he normally kept carefully contained were brought to the fore. Harry stumbled, holding a hand to his face as he was bombarded with the worst memories that his mind had to offer.

"You're just a good for nothing freak!" his uncle shouted, looking over him and spraying spittle all over his face.

The glass window shattered and a gaunt hand appeared. Weathered fingers clutched the windowsill, and a figure soon followed the fingers. A hood covered its head, leaving its face masked in darkness. Even with his enhanced vision, Harry could not see past the darkness, which meant it was likely magic that kept him from seeing beyond. A tattered cloak covered its frame. Only its gaunt hands were visible as it floated into the room.

"Damn freak!"

"You're lucky that we've decided to accept you into our house! Be grateful!"

"Not Harry, please... have mercy... have mercy..."

"We would've been better off without you!"

"How useless can brat be?!"

"How could you fail me like that?"

"Worthless!"

"Foul!"

"Loathsome!"

"You would've been better of dying with your parents!"

"Why couldn't you protect me?"

The images came faster and faster, rushing through his head like a torrential flood. He tried to make them stop, to make them go away, but none of his Occlumency techniques were working. It seemed like the more he tried, the more impossible it became.

Dizziness swept over him. Harry fell to his hands and knees, vomit spewing from his mouth as his mind rebelled against what it saw. His vision blurred as he fell face first into his own puke.

A corpse lay on a bed. Bushy brown hair spread out around it. The corpse opened its eyes and looked at him, its mouth moving to form words, "why didn't you protect me?"

The visions became worse. He barely saw the hand that reached out to grab his face.

A man garbed in a dark cloak held a wand. As green light shot from it, the woman who stood protectively in front of him died, her body crumpling to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut. She landed face up instead of face down, allowing him to see her face. Even though her eyes were lifeless, they seemed to ask him a question. "Why couldn't you save me?"

The world spun faster. Harry felt himself being lifted off his feet. He would've struggled, but all of his strength had left him. His arms and legs hung limply, like they'd been weighed down by lead, and darkness crept at the edge of his vision.

"Expecto Patronum!" Harry heard shouting as darkness engulfed him.

Albus Dumbledore sat in his office, waiting for the time that he would go down and greet the new and returning students. Despite what had happened this past summer, he was still looking forward to seeing the faces of the students who were coming to Hogwarts. Watching young people learn to wield magic, seeing the joy light up in their eyes as they discovered the wonders of this world, it was one of his greatest joys.

I wonder if Harry will be coming to Hogwarts...

He still didn't know where Harry was, if he was all right, or indeed, if he was being held prisoner. He knew that Harry was alive thanks to the owls that still tried to deliver his school letters-they would not do so if he was dead-but that was it. Albus suspected that Harry was hiding through the use of a Fidelius Charm, though who could have cast such a complex charm was something that he couldn't fathom.

As he thought about Harry, someone tripped his wards seconds before the door slammed open, and a harried Minerva McGonagall burst into the room.

"Minerva," Albus frowned, "what's wrong?"

The woman looked positively flustered. Her hair was in disarray, and her clothing was askew. She was also breathing heavily, as if she'd run from the Gryffindor tower to here.

"It's Harry Potter!" she said, her eyes wide. "He's been attacked by dementors!"

I'd like to apologize for taking so long to update this story. I've been working on my other fanfic, Devil Ninja, and I also have been caught up writing my original stories.

You'll notice that this chapter is pretty short for me. Before you ask, no, it's not because of the holidays. I always strive to only add the words necessary to tell my story. It just so happens that most of my stories require longer chapters. Right now, we're only at the beginning of my story. This is merely an introduction, and since there's no world building involved right now, it means chapters are shorter. The next chapter should be much longer, since we'll be getting to the meat of the story.

Anyway, that's all for now. I hope you all enjoy this chapter. Thank you for your support.

The Memory Remains

Chapter 7

The Memory Remains

Albus Albus burst into the hospital wing, startling Madame Pomfrey, who was standing near one of the beds.

"Professor Dumbledore," she said, her tone scolding. "Don't just barge in here like that. What would you have done if I was performing complicated healing magic on a patient?"

"My apologies, Poppy," Albus apologized, though his attention was focused mostly on the bed. "I do not believe that I am quite in my right mind at the moment." He walked up to the bed, upon which there lay a familiar boy with messy black hair and a thunderbolt scar. "How is he?"

"He is mostly fine, however, had Professor Lupin been even a second later, then Harry would be a body without a soul right now."

Dumbledore quelled the anger he felt. There was no sense in allowing his mind to become clouded. He needed to remain calm, to think about the situation logically, and to make the right choice—not the easy choice.

As his mind became unfogged, Albus realized that there was someone else within the room aside from him and Minerva, who'd followed closely behind him.

"Remus—or should I say, Professor Lupin," Albus greeted the man with a smile, extending his hand. "I wish the circumstances of our meeting were different, but thank you for coming."

"You and I are in the same boat, I'm afraid." Remus took Albus' hand and shook it firmly. "Thank you for having me." The slight smile that he wore left as his eyes strayed to Harry. "I still can't believe that Harry was attacked by dementors."

"It is possible that the dementors sensed Sirius Black's magic on him," Albus theorized. "As I told you in my letters, Sirius Black apparently found Harry during the summer, and they both vanished. If they have been with each other all this time, then it is likely that Harry is under his control through the use of charms. He might even be imperiused."

"I hate to destroy your theories, but I'm afraid that there are no signs of Mr. Potter being placed under any spells, nor does he appear to be under the effects of a potion," Madam Pomfrey informed them. "I've already done every standard examination spell, and even a few of the not-so-standard. He is as clean as they come."

Albus frowned. "You mean he's not been influenced at all?"

"Not one bit."

The frown deepened. The mere fact that Harry was alive was incredible. He would've thought that Sirius would want to finish the job that he started over a decade ago and end the Potter line. When that hadn't come to pass, and the monitors that let him know if Harry was alive or not remained active, he'd assumed that Harry was going to be used for something nefarious; he'd been anticipating it.

And now Madam Pomfrey was telling him that Harry was not under Black's control.

I am missing something.

There was a larger picture that he wasn't seeing, a piece to the puzzle that he didn't have. Albus glanced at Harry again. The boy lay there, still, unmoving. Were it not for his shallow breaths, Albus would have mistaken him for a corpse. Did he have the final piece that would help him understand this situation?

"Albus?" McGonagall asked behind him, her voice uncertain.

"Let's allow young Harry to get his rest," Albus said at last. "Professor Lupin, Minerva, if you two would follow me. There are many young children who're waiting to be sorted, and I am sure that the returning students are ravenous by now."

Much as he would've liked to stay and wait until Harry was awake, he had other obligations.

With nothing left to do here, Albus Dumbledore left the hospital wing with Minerva McGonagall and Remus Lupin in tow.

XoX

It was a somber crowd who sat at the Hufflepuff table.

Susan Bones, especially, was experiencing something very close to shock. She'd just witnessed her friend, Harry Potter, nearly getting his soul sucked out by a dementor.

Despite her aunt being the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Susan Bones had never seen, much less been near, a dementor. Her aunty did not like them. She'd once told Susan that dementors were the worst creature to have ever existed, and that just being near one was enough for normal people to lose their sanity. Having now seen one for herself, she could attest to that fact. Thank Merlin that Professor Lupin had been present to drive the dementors off.

"Hey, hey, Susan." Ernie Macmillon leaned over with an anxious and, dare she say it, excited expression on his face. "Is it true that Harry Potter was attacked by dementors on the train?"

While Hannah glared at Ernie for his crass question, Susan put on her best poker face and nodded. "It's true. When Hannah and I found him, he was on the verge of getting the dementor's kiss."

"Bloody hell," Justin Finch-Fletchly muttered, his eyes wide. "Never would've thought that The Harry Potter would be attacked by dementors."

Susan said nothing. She didn't want to talk about what happened right now, so she let the conversation die. The doors opening to admit Headmaster Dumbledore, and Professors McGonagall and Lupin, gave her the perfect excuse to turn her attention elsewhere.

As the two professors moved to their seats and Dumbledore took center stage, Susan Bones turned her thoughts to the young boy sleeping in the

hospital wing.

Harry...

XoX

The sorting ceremony had been very subdued. Daphne didn't blame anyone for this. If anything, she was grateful for the somber atmosphere. It meant that she could be as moody as she wanted and not have to worry about what other people thought.

During the ceremony, Professor Dumbledore had confirmed that Harry had been attacked by dementors, and that he was currently recuperating. This had put an end to any speculation about what had happened. Daphne was grateful for that. She didn't like hearing the things that people had to say about her friend.

After his short speech about how they should all wish Harry a speedy recovery, the sorting had commenced. Daphne hadn't paid much attention to the sorting. The only person that she cared to know about was her sister. Incidentally, her sister had been sorted into, not Slytherin, but Gryffindor. Father wouldn't be pleased, but she hoped that her new friends could shield Stori from whatever retribution he might try to dish out.

After the sorting, dinner had commenced. Daphne barely paid attention to her meal. A glance at Tracey and Blaise revealed that they, too, were in a slump. Many conversations flowed around her, but she ignored them, especially because most of the conversation was about Harry Potter. Hearing about her friend made her moodier than she already was.

When dinner ended, everyone was gathered by the prefects, who led them to their respective dorms.

The Slytherin dorms were not what she would have called pleasant. Dark stone made everything feel eerie. The walls, floor, and ceiling were like obsidian, absorbing light and casting shadows. Despite this, the main room was well-lit, and the dark green couches were comfortable to sit on. While the fire crackling in the fireplace somehow seemed sinister, it gave off the warmth necessary to keep the room from becoming cold.

"It looks like the mighty has finally fallen," Draco Malfoy's voice penetrated the fog that had clouded Daphne's mind. "It's too bad it was a dementor that did Pothead in. I would've liked to lay him low myself."

"You're a fool if you think a dweeb like you could ever beat Harry," Tracey said, her voice thick with scorn. "A loser who's only in the middle of all his classes, who takes days to learn a single spell, wouldn't be able beat a hamster, much less Harry."

Draco Malfoy's face twisted into a sneer, even as his cheeks turned red. "You'd better watch what you say, filth!"

"The only one who needs to watch what he says is you!"

"You disgusting half-blood! I don't know what your father was thinking when he married your filthy mud-blood mother, but he was clearly-"

As Malfoy began spewing insults, Daphne decided that enough was enough. Quicker than anyone else could see, she whipped out her wand and pointed it at the boy.

There was no spell spoken, no incantations said. Light burst from her wand's tip. The light transformed into ropes, and the ropes quickly wrapped around Draco Malfoy, who, yelping as he lost his balance, fell to the floor with a thud.

Crabbe and Goyle reacted quickly to their master's plight, but Tracey and Blaize were quicker. Their wands were out and they'd already cast simultaneous stupefies before Crabbe and Goyle could even reach for their wands. The two ape-like students crumpled like marionettes without their puppet master.

Draco was screaming. "What do you think you're doing, wench?! When my father hears about this-"

He shut up when Daphne shoved the glowing tip of her wand under his face. "Listen to me and listen well, Draco Malfoy. I. Am. Not. In the mood. To listen to you. If I hear you badmouth Harry one more time, I will make sure that you regret ever uttering a single syllable from that foul mouth of yours, and neither you, nor your father, will be able to stop me. Have I

made myself clear?"

Draco's eyes, while frightened, were still defiant. Daphne frowned. That would not do at all. While her father had been a terrible father, he'd taught her many important lessons. One of those lessons was that when people felt defiant, they were liable to retaliate.

Wanting to show Draco that she meant what she said, she placed the tip of her wand against his collarbone. A loud shriek akin to a dying animal erupted from his lips. Smoke rose from where the wand was pressed. Draco struggled, but she'd not only bound him in rope, she'd also cast an immobilization spell on him.

When she removed the wand, it revealed that there was no wound—not a burn, mark, or scar. The spell that she had used was one that she'd learned from having her father use it on her several times in the past. It was actually used as a method of punishment. Electricity was generated from the wand, then shoved into the victim. It was quite the shocking spell.

"Do. I. Make. My. Self. Clear?" she asked again.

Draco couldn't nod fast enough.

"Good."

Standing up, Daphne removed the binds and immobilization spell. As Draco slumped against the ground, quivering in defeat, Daphne stepped around him and walked toward the girl's room. Behind her, she could hear Tracey's, "remind me to never get on her bad side." Such words would have normally made her smile, but she did not smile this time.

The light from the lamps cast abominable shadows along the wall.

XoX

Harry Potter woke up to the clean scent of freshly laundered sheets and a familiar ceiling. Having already spent several nights in Hogwarts hospital wing, he knew that that was his current location, though he didn't know how he'd gotten there. The last thing that he recalled was...

"Why couldn't you protect me?"

Harry closed his eyes, as if doing so would block out the nightmare invading his mind. It wasn't real. This figment of his imagination was merely an illusion brought about by the dementors.

But if that's the case, then why does it still haunt me?

Clearing his mind, Harry willfully pushed away the visions that lingered, locking them inside of a cage in the back of his mind.

"Oh!" a startled voice exclaimed. "I see you're finally awake."

"Madam Pomfrey," Harry mumbled, looking at the head of the hospital wing. She was an older woman with graying hair, dressed in the robes of a medic, and wearing a bonnet-like witches hat on her head.

"Don't try to get up," she told him. "Lie back down while I give you a check up."

Harry was too tired to argue with her, so he let the woman do as she pleased. Lying back on the bed, he observed his surroundings some more. Light streamed in through the window, letting him know that it was morning, which meant that he must have spent the entire night in this bed.

I missed the sorting ceremony.

It didn't really matter if he missed it or not, since he wasn't interested in learning about the new students. Still, knowing that he'd been out for an entire day bothered him.

Madam Pomfrey moved her wand over him. The glowing blue tip hovered around his head, chest, and legs. He didn't know which spell she was using, but he could tell from the flow of magic that it was more complicated than most medical spells. Was it a scanning spell of some kind?

"Well, it looks like you don't have any lingering side effects from nearly receiving a dementor's kiss." Huffing, the woman shook her head.

"Honestly, just what was Minister Fudge thinking when he decided to use those horrible creatures."

Harry would have liked to know that too. Putting creatures that sucked out souls in a place filled with children didn't sound like one of the Minister's better ideas.

"When will I be able to leave?" asked Harry.

"Not until Professor Dumbledore has had a chance to speak with you," Madam Pomfrey said. "Now, please wait here while I inform him that you are awake."

Harry wasn't sure if he wanted to see the headmaster right then, but it wasn't like he was being given much of a choice either. As he watched Madam Pomfrey walk out, he settled back into the bed, knowing that he would be in for a long wait.

Outside of his window, the trees of the Forbidden Forest swayed an nonexistent breeze.

XoX

Albus had waited until morning to floo call Cornelius Fudge. When the man in question answered, he was still wearing his pajamas and appeared to have just woken up.

"Albus? What is the meaning of calling me so early in the morning?"

"Cornelius Fudge." Albus's voice could've frozen lava. It certainly froze Fudge. "I doubt that you are aware of the incident that happened last night, so I wanted to inform you as a courtesy. Last night on the Hogwarts Express, Harry James Potter was attacked by dementors and almost received the dementor's kiss."

The Minister of Magic paled. "W-what—Harry Potter almost—impossible!"

"It is very possible," Albus said, his tone almost mockingly mild. "Had my newest defense professor been even a second slower, Harry Potter

would no longer be with us. Now do you see why I told you that dementors should not be allowed at Hogwarts? They do not distinguish between criminals and civilians. You should remove the dementors from Hogwarts before more of our students are attacked."

Cornelius Fudge sputtered. "N-now see here, Dumbledore! I can't just send the dementors back to Azkaban! That would cause me to lose face!"

"Better to lose face than the lives of our students."

"Look, Dumbledore. I understand that you're worried, but I think you're overreacting here. I doubt the dementors are—"

"Overreacting?" Albus felt a cold chill spread through him. "You think I am overreacting? One of our students almost received the dementor's kiss, and you think I am overreacting?" Fudge fell silent. "You do not seem to be aware of the situation here, Cornelius. Harry Potter is currently in the hospital wing, lying unconscious in a bed, because of your decision."

"N-n-now Dumbledore, see reason. You can't pin this whole incident on me! There was no way that I could have known this would happen! Besides, I was only following Lucius's advice."

"Lucius Malfoy?" Albus frowned as an unpleasant sensation welled up inside of him. "I see. So, Lucius is the one who told you to let those wretched creatures into this place of learning. It seems that I will need to speak with him as well."

Albus tried for nearly fifteen more minutes to convince Fudge that he needed to pull the dementors back, but it was all for naught. It wasn't just that Fudge didn't want to pull them back. He also didn't to lose face. If he pulled them out now, it would be like admitting that he was wrong, which could result in him getting slandered in the Daily Prophet. Albus personally thought that Fudge should worry more about the students and less about his public image.

"I don't care what you say, Albus! I'm not going to call off the dementors and that's that!"

The call ended when Fudge became frustrated with him. Albus stared into the fireplace, which now had a normal fire merrily crackling away. He was frustrated by Fudge's inability to look past his own image, but there wasn't much he could do right now.

I'll need to think of a way to get the dementors out of Hogwarts... perhaps if I...

Albus's thoughts were interrupted by his wards going off. Someone was at the door. Judging from the feel of their magic, it was...

"Enter, Madam Pomfrey," he said before the woman could knock.

There was a moment's pause, then the door opened to reveal Hogwarts' resident mediwitch. Madam Pomfrey did not enter the room. She merely stood by the doorway and said, "I thought I would let you know that Harry Potter is awake, Headmaster."

Albus was out of his seat and moving toward the door before the healer could even finish. He moved past the woman, who followed after him, keeping up with his longer stride by taking faster steps.

"How is he?"

"He seems to be in good health," she said. "There doesn't appear to be anything wrong with him. He was perfectly capable of recognition and speech upon waking up."

Albus nodded as he and Madam Pomfrey entered the hospital. Harry was awake and sitting up in bed. He looked to be deep in thought. He didn't even react to them until they were standing next to his bed.

"Professor Dumbledore," Harry greeted, his tone absent minded, as if he was thinking of other things.

"Mr. Potter, I'm glad to see that you're awake. You gave us all quite the scare."

"I apologize for that."

"No, no. It is nothing that you need to apologize for," Albus said easily. "None of this is your fault. What happened on that train was something would have never happened under normal circumstances. I am merely glad to see that you are all right."

"That's kind of you to say, sir."

Albus felt a sense of unease as he spoke with Harry. The young boy sitting on the bed gave no indication that anything was wrong. He was perfectly polite, just like he always was, and yet everything about him felt off somehow. It felt like Albus was looking at Harry through distorted glass.

"I'd like to let you get a little more rest," Albus started again, "but before that, would you mind if I asked you some questions?"

"Not at all. Ask away."

"What have you been up to this summer?"

"Up to?" Offering a quizzical tilt of his head, Harry sent him a confused glance. "I'm not sure what you mean by that. I've not been up to anything that I know of."

"Nothing? Surely, you've been doing something..."

Harry shook his head. "The last thing that I remember was coming home to Aunt Petunia's and Uncle Vernon's, then I was getting on the Hogwarts express."

That can't be right.

"Are you saying that you have no memories of what happened this summer?"

"It would appear so, Professor."

Albus stroked his beard, more to calm himself down than for any other reason. It seemed as if Harry Potter did not have any memories of this summer at all. There was the possibility that he was lying, of course, but

there was no way for Albus to confirm that right now—unless he decided to legilimency. However, he didn't want to invade Harry's mind.

"I see," he sighed. "In that case, Mr. Potter, would you mind if I asked you to get some rest here for a while?"

"Not at all."

"Good. And also, I'll grab some forms that I need you to fill out. Our owls couldn't find you this summer, so we never learned what electives you wish to take."

"Understood. Thank you, sir."

"You're most welcome."

Albus left Harry Potter and traveled up to his office. There, he threw some floo powder into the fire and called out the name of the person that he wished to speak with.

"Amelia Bones."

The flames turned bright green, shifting to form the familiar face of the Head of Law Enforcement.

"Albus? It's rare for you to call me. Is there something you needed?"

"Yes... I'd like you to come with some aurors as soon as possible," Dumbledore said. "There is something of an emergency situation here right now."

"I've heard. My niece told me." Amelia's disembodied head shook. "Harry Potter attacked by dementors. The news is going to have a field day if this gets out."

"I intend on letting the public know exactly what happened," Albus said. "For now, however, there is something else that I need your help with."

Amelia hesitated before speaking. "I can be there later today. I'll bring Shacklebolt and Tonks with me. Should I bring anything else?"

"If possible, I'd like you to bring some veritaserum."

Amelia's eyebrows rose past her hairline. "Are you sure that's necessary?"

Albus deliberated before nodding. "Yes. Given the present situation, I do believe that it is necessary."

"Very well. I'll be there soon."

"I'll be expecting you."

As the floo cut off, Albus grabbed some more powder. He had one more call to make.

XoX

The morning air was mild.

Susan Bones and Daphne Greengrass jogged side by side. Despite the fact that Harry was not there, they'd decided to continue exercising, if only because it was something that everyone in their group now did.

"You have a lot more endurance than before," Daphne commented as they wound around the Black Lake. The others were also running, though Tracey was lagging way behind. The poor girl looked about ready to keel over.

"I've... been running... during the summer..." Susan huffed. Daphne enviously eyed the way her friend's chest bounced. Someone her age shouldn't have breasts like that.

"I never saw you run."

"It... it was... in... the morning..."

Which meant that Susan had done her exercise before everyone woke up. She wondered if the others had thought of exercising during the summer, but she immediately dismissed the notion. Of course they hadn't. Otherwise, they would have followed Susan's example.

"You seem really dedicated," Daphne said.

Susan, her cheeks red from her exertions, smiled. "I... I want... to help... Harry..."

Daphne sobered. That's what it always came to. Harry. He was the one who'd brought them together, but now he felt so far from them.

"Do you think he's avoiding us?" Daphne wondered out loud.

"W-why... do you think that?"

Daphne slowed her jog to a trot. On the other side of the lake, Neville and Blaise were finishing their laps, and Terry wasn't far behind them. "During the summer after our first year, Harry would diligently send letters to everyone, right? He even planned our shopping trip and made it possible for myself and my sister to go out. This summer, none of us have received so much as a single letter."

"T-that is true... it does sound like he's distancing himself from us, but why would he do that?" Now that they were moving more slowly, Susan's breathing evened out, allowing her to speak normally.

Why indeed. Daphne thought about that same thing, and she only only come up to a single conclusion. "If he is avoiding us, then it's likely because of Hermione."

Last year, Hermione Granger had been killed. It had been quick, decisive. They hadn't even known that she was dead until well after her body had been found.

Her death had hurt everyone, but she imagined that Harry was the worst off. She'd already gotten a good grasp of his personality. He took looking after them very seriously. When one of them was being picked on, he'd find whoever was bullying them and take revenge. When one of them was in trouble, he'd bend over backwards to lend them a hand. Daphne actually had the sense that Harry was doing this out of feelings of obligation. If that was the case, then failing to do what he saw as his duty was likely eating him up inside.

"People deal with grief differently," Daphne said at last. "Maybe he's the kind of person who deals with it alone."

"B-but that would mean that he doesn't have anyone to support him!" Susan appeared befuddled. "I would have been completely lost without all of you supporting me. Why wouldn't he want to surround himself with people who can help him?"

"I'm afraid the only way to know that would be to ask Harry himself." Daphne's smile was rather mirthless. "And I'm not sure if he's going to be willing to speak with us right now."

XoX

Amelia Bones arrived in Hogwarts nearly an hour after the students had breakfast. Most of the students were wandering the castle. There were no classes that day, since they had arrived on Wednesday night. Classes would start next week.

She arrived by floo. Exiting the large fireplace in Albus Dumbledore's office. As she stepped out of the fireplace, Nymphadora Tonks and Kinglsey Shacklebolt appeared seconds later.

"Thank you for coming," Dumbledore greeted her and the others.

She shook the hand that Dumbledore offered. "Considering what you told me, I could do nothing less. Where is he?"

"In the hospital wing."

Amelia followed Dumbledore as he led her to the hospital wing. Walking through the olden corridors, with their moving suits of armor and many paintings, gave her a nostalgic feeling. It had been a long time since she'd been a student here. She even remembered how Dumbledore, then a teacher, had been one of her favorites.

When they reached the hospital, it was to find all of Harry's friends standing outside of the door. It looked like they were arguing with Madam Pomfrey.

"Can't we just see him for a little bit?" asked Hannah.

"No means no. Mr. Potter needs his rest, and he won't get it if you bother him," Madam Pomfrey said.

"But—"

"No buts."

"I'm assuming all of you are here to see Harry?" Dumbledore said, causing the children's attention to snap over to him.

"Professor Dumbledore," Daphne greeted courteously. The others followed her example—except for Tracey.

"You bet we're here to see Harry, so why don't you convince this old bat to let us in?"

"O-old bat?!" an indignant Madam Pomfrey huffed.

Dumbledore chortled. "I wouldn't mind letting you all see Mr. Potter, however, I'd like to ask that you please wait until after we've had a chance to speak with him."

"We?" Tracey asked.

Amelia almost grinned when Susan finally noticed her presence. At her shout of "aunty!" the others also noticed her, Tonks, and Shacklebolt.

"Hello, Susan."

"What are you doing here?"

"Since Mr. Potter has been missing for so long, there's a few question that we would like to ask him."

"I see."

"Why don't you all go out and enjoy the sunshine for a little while," Dumbledore suggested. "Madam Bones and I have some things that we must discuss with Mr. Potter, and it will likely take several hours. You can

visit him later."

The group of youngsters deliberated amongst each other. Dumbledore watched them with a sense of pride. It did his heart good to see them so worried for Harry.

"All right. Fine." Tracey appeared to be their spokesperson for the day. "We'll leave, but we're coming back soon. Got it?"

"Smooth moves there, Trace. Have you ever thought of being a diplomat?" Daphne asked.

"Shut it, Daph. I'm being serious."

"So am I."

The group of youngsters walked away. Amelia listened to their conversation, which she could hear even as they got further away.

"I agree with Daphne," Terry said.

"Can it, Boot."

"You really should be a little more polite."

"Not you too, Lisa!"

"It's always nice to see how well they get along," Amelia said as the group disappeared around a corner.

"Indeed," Dumbledore agreed. "They embody the sort of unity that I hope all of Hogwarts will someday have. Thanks to them and Harry, our school is well on our way towards becoming truly unified." He paused to regain his wits. "Come, let's see how Mr. Potter is doing."

"Agreed," Amelia said.

"Don't stay too long," Madam Pomfrey warned. "Mr. Potter still needs his rest."

"Of course, Poppy."

Amelia followed Dumbledore into the hospital wing. There, they found Harry, sitting up on his bed, his eyes closed and his posture straight. He looked like he was meditating.

"Professor Dumbledore." Harry opened his eyes, and Amelia was taken aback by how blank they were. His eyes were always cool and composed, but these looked... dead.

"Good morning, Harry. I hope you're doing well."

"I am fine. Thank you. I see you've brought company this morning. Madam Bones, Tonks, it's a pleasure to see you two again."

"Hey there, Harry!" Tonks greeted in an enthusiastic voice.

Harry nodded at Tonks, then looked at the large man standing next to her. Kingsley Shacklebolt stepped forward and offered his hand.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Mr. Potter," Kingsley said.

"Likewise." Harry shook Kingsley's hand. "I remember how you replaced Lockheart last year. I was impressed with the breadth and depth of knowledge you have."

Kingsley smiled. "Thank you."

Deciding that this was good enough for introductions and greetings, Amelia stepped forward. "Harry, we'd like to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind."

Tilting his head at just the right angle, Harry presented her with an almost perfect mask of quizzicality. "I don't mind answering some questions."

"And if I said that I wanted you to answer those questions under veritaserum, would you consent?" she asked. This was the big issue. Because Harry Potter was a minor, they couldn't force him to answer under veritaserum. If he said no, then they would have to ask questions the normal way.

"I don't mind," Harry said.

Amelia breathed a sigh of relief, but she was also frowning. Surely, he'd seen Shacklebolt and Tonks barge into his hideout just before he escaped. He must have known that they knew some of what he'd been up to, just as they also knew that he'd been with Sirius Black this whole time.

"Let it stand for the record that I, Amelia Bones, the Head of the Department of Law Enforcement, have been given permission to administer veritaserum to Harry James Potter, the heir apparent to the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter. Albus Brian Wolfric Percival Dumbledore, will you stand as my witness?"

"I will."

"Then let's administer the veritaserum."

After administering the veritaserum, placing two drops on Harry's tongue, and watching his eyes glaze over, Amelia began her questioning.

"What is your name?"

"Harry James Potter."

"When were you born?"

"July thirty-first, 1990."

"What were you doing on the twentieth of June?"

"I went home."

"And what did you do after that?"

"..."

"Harry?"

"... I don't know."

She frowned. "What do you mean you don't know?"

"I mean that I do not know. I have no recollection of what I did after going home."

Amelia shared a startled look with Dumbledore. She could tell that Harry was not resisting the potion—not like there was a way to resist a potion as strong as veritaserum. Of course, this meant that everything that he said was true, which also meant that Harry Potter was missing three months worth of memories. She asked him a few more questions, trying to make them roundabout questions of what he did during the summer, but every answer was the same. He didn't know—rather, he couldn't remember.

Realizing that further questioning would be a lost cause, she administered the antidote. Harry blinked several times, his mind coming to, then looked at her.

"Did I answer your questions in a satisfactory manner?"

She answered him with a pained smile. "As satisfactory as you could, given the circumstances."

Since Harry had answered all of her questions, there was no need to stick around. After saying farewell, she, Albus, Tonks, and Shacklebolt, left the room and traveled back up to Albus Dumbledore's office.

"That could have gone better," Amelia said.

"Indeed," Albus agreed.

"I'm not sure I understand what's going on," Tonks admitted. "What just happened?"

"It seems like Harry's memory has been erased," Shacklebolt said in a grave voice.

"Erased?! How?!" Tonks squawked.

"There are any number of methods for erasing one's memory."

Dumbledore sat behind his desk and steepled his fingers together.

"Obliviation, potions, charms... even blunt force trauma can serve to

erase memories."

"Do you think Harry's memories were obliviated?" Amelia asked.

"Madam Pomfrey did check to see if he was under the affects of magic," Dumbledore said. "However, an oblivation spell does not leave any traces. I would say that it's perfectly possible that Sirius Black erased Harry's memory."

Amelia could only agree, even though she did not like the implications. "If Black did erase Harry's memory, then it's logical to assume that he has a reason for letting Harry live."

"That is my belief as well," Dumbledore confirmed. "However, as of right now, we have nothing concrete to go off of. Without any evidence, we can't do anything—and Sirius Black is still missing."

"What do you think we should do?"

Dumbledore paused. Amelia assumed rightly that he was thinking. "I'll inform my teachers of what's happened to Harry and ask them to keep on eye on any suspicious movements from him. That's about the only thing that we can do."

Even though she agreed with Dumbledore's assessment of their situation, she still didn't like it. Not one bit. Still, she nodded. "Yes, I suppose it is."

XoX

Harry sighed as he finally made it to the Gryffindor Tower. After being interrogated by Amelia Bones, he'd used a subtle charm on Madam Pomfrey that made her think he was fine and let him go. After that, he'd hid from everybody with prodigious use of concealment charms. He knew that his friends had wanted to see him, but he did not want to see them.

That's right. I have no friends. They're a burden.

It was late at night when Harry arrived in the dorm. He'd managed to steal the password to get into the Gryffindor tower from the mind of a

wandering prefect. When entered his dorm, everyone else was already asleep. He crept over to his bed, being careful to remain silent.

His trunk was already there, as expected. The house elves had likely brought it in. Opening it up, Harry slowly entered his trunk. There, he found several objects of interest; a bookshelf, a table, and a pensieve sitting in the corner. It was the pensieve that he went over to.

Several ethereal strands were already swirling around inside, memories that he'd taken out of his head before even hopping on the Hogwarts Express. Harry didn't hesitate to return the memories to his mind. He grabbed each strand with his wand, then slowly put them to his head. As the memories leaked in, images appeared before him, of the time he'd spent at his hideout, of Sirius Black, and of his plan to capture Pettigrew.

Harry had known that if he showed up at Hogwarts, questions would be asked. He'd already predicted that Dumbledore would call the auror department. He'd also predicted the use of veritaserum, which was why he'd rid himself of the memories and placed them in a pensieve. If he didn't have the memories, then they didn't exist, and he wouldn't give himself away.

Of course, storing his memories was a double-edged sword. Had they asked him why he didn't have his memories, Harry would have been forced to let them know that, due to his eidetic memory, he knew that his memories had not been erased but stored in a pensieve. Fortunately, they hadn't asked. More than likely, they believed him to be nothing but a mere child who was being used by Sirius Black for some nefarious purpose.

If only they knew the truth.

Exiting the trunk, Harry pulled out his wand and waved it, causing the entire object to levitate. He waved his wand again. Materializing from thin air was another trunk, exactly the same as the one hovering over the ground.

A conjured trunk isn't going to last. I need something more permanent.

Waving his hand caused the real trunk's lid to pop open and a calligraphy

pen to fly into his hand. After inscribing the seal for longevity in ancient Egyptian onto the conjured trunk, he stepped back and left the room, then exited the Gryffindor tower entirely.

Wandering the halls, Harry silently crept along the darkened corridors, being careful to avoid being spotted by the portraits. He'd cast a disillusionment charm over himself, and he'd thrown his invisibility cloak on for good measure. None of the portraits called out as he passed them. Even the suits of armor remained silent.

It didn't take long for Harry to reach the girl's bathroom on the second floor. Without hesitation, he walked inside, his footsteps completely silent due to the muffling spell that he'd placed on them.

As he entered, Harry heard the sound of sobbing coming from one of the stalls. That must have been Myrtle, the girl's bathroom's resident ghost. He ignored the sound and walked up to the sink.

"Open."

The words, hissed in a language that no one but himself and Voldemort could understand, caused the entire sink to collapse in on itself, revealing a large hole like the gaping maw of a massive predator.

"Who's there?!"

Moaning Myrtle floated out of her stall to take a look around. She saw the hole that was now in the bathroom and gaped at it. Harry, not wanting her to tell anyone about what happened, waved his wand at her, casting a silent forgetfulness charm that he'd devised specifically for ghosts. The translucent being before him went still. Harry saw her eyes glaze over, informing him that his spell had been successful. Myrtle wouldn't be bothering him for a while now.

I'll have to see if there's another method of entering the Chamber of Secrets from now on. I don't want to erase her memory every time it happens.

Making sure that the entrance closed behind him, Harry slid down the passage that led into the Chamber of Secrets.

The place looked just as he remembered. The stone floor was grimy and covered in dust. The ancient walls appeared unstable. Statues of Salazar Slytherin lined either side of the chamber. Lying in the very heart of the chamber was the basilisk, it's cold corpse somehow pristine despite how much time had passed since Harry had killed it.

It must be the remnants of magic that I can feel coming from this creature.

Basilisks were insanely powerful magical creatures. Of the many magical creatures in the world, they were ranked near the top in terms of capacity and potency. Only Griffins, Phoenixes, and certain types of dragons were said to have more magic than basilisks.

I wonder if I can extract parts of the basilisk to use in my potions.

Thinking about it, the insides of a basilisk could probably be used for potion ingredients. He'd never read anything about basilisks being used in a potion, but that was likely because they were so rare that no one had ever been able to use them for potion ingredients. He would need to do some research to find out for sure whether basilisk parts made viable ingredients.

Either way, I can use the hide and bones.

Basilisk hide would likely fetch a hefty price, should he find the right person to sell it to. He could also make some clothing of his own from it. The hide of a basilisk was highly resistant to magic. It would make great armor.

After observing the chamber for several seconds longer, Harry decided that the Chamber of Secrets would make a perfect laboratory for his experiments. It was safe, secure, and no one but he could enter it.

That night, Harry Potter worked until the sun came up.

All right! I've finally got another chapter up, and things are going to start changing a bit. I'm not going to focus as much on Harry right now because he's being emo and I don't really like emo. While I'll

have some scenes featuring him, my bigger focus in the coming chapters are going to be his friends. There will probably around 2 or 3 more chapters of emo Harry before the ball really gets rolling. I'm hoping to have this part over with soon.

Before I leave you all, I would like to make several announcements. First, book 4 of the American Kitsune series, *A Fox's Family*, is officially available for pre-order on Amazon in paperback and kindle. Anyone who's interested in supporting my dreams of becoming a full-time author can either go straight to Amazon and look up *A Fox's Family*, or they can go to my website [www dot varnell - brandon dot com](http://www.dotvarnell-brandon.com). To those of you who decide to support me, thank you very much. It's because of you that I can continue writing every day.

My second announcement is the republishing of book 1, *A Fox's Love*. The original book 1 was littered with mistakes and wasn't as good as the next books in the series. I've since fixed those mistakes, hired a professional editor to proofread my story, and added in-book manga-style illustrations. If you've already bought a copy, you can upgrade to your new copy for free. If bought it in paperback, then you can download the kindle version for free. If you decide to do this, I hope that you enjoy the new version.

For those of you who are curious to know what my published books are about, you can read the short description of them below.

A Fox's Love

The story of a boy, a fox, and a lot of fanservice...

Kevin Swift has the worst luck with women. It's not that he's unattractive or even unpopular. He just can't talk to them. He blames it on all of those shōnen love comedies that he enjoys watching. Fortunately, or unfortunately—depending on who's asking—Kevin's love life is about to start looking up.

After saving a fox, Kevin discovers that he actually rescued a kitsune, a shape-shifter capable of transforming into a beautiful girl who appears to have popped right out of the pages to a shōnen manga. Her name is

Lilian, and she's decided that he's going to be her mate—whether he likes it or not!

Between dealing with an overly amorous vixen's zealous attempts at getting into his pants, his inability to talk to girls and school, Kevin is going to have his hands full.

A Fox's Tail

Life has finally settled down for Kevin Swift. Sure, he's still dealing with Lilian's zany antics, but that's alright, he's actually starting to enjoy the gorgeous Kitsune's continued presence. Too bad he's in denial. Unfortunately for him, life likes to throw fastballs when you least expect it to, and his life is about to get ecchi—I-I mean, ugly.

A tsundere dressed in gothic lolita fashion...

A boy whose hair is bigger than his brain...

A new enemy that makes Chris Fleischer look like a fifty pound weakling...

Trying to admit his feelings for a certain tomboy...

Not to mention Lilian herself. Yeah, Kevin's got problems, and life can only get more strenuous from here on out.

Oh, well. At least he hasn't been turned into a Harem Protagonist.

A Fox's Maid

The tail of a boy, a kitsune... and a maid?

Kevin Swift doesn't know what to think anymore. His love for Lindsay has dwindled, he's constantly plagued by thoughts of Lilian, and now he has to deal with his sexy housemate's maid: A kimono-clad, katana-wielding femme fatale who doesn't like him very much—and who has this weird tendency of adding Japanese suffixes to everyone's name for some reason. Go figure.

Now Kevin must make an irreversible choice: To become Lilian's mate or not. It's a life changing decision that no teenager should have to make. Unfortunately for him, Lilian's maid has basically threatened to clean out his entrails with her katana if he doesn't.

He used to think being a teenager sucked. Now he's realized that being a teenager is nothing compared to being the potential mate to a kitsune whose maid holds no moral compunctions about flaying him alive.

A Fox's Family

Two weeks have passed since Kevin Swift was kidnapped by spandex-clad secret agents, rescued by Lilian, and they were both subsequently saved by Lilian's faithful maid-slash-bodyguard. Since then, Kevin has nabbed himself a foxy girlfriend—pun very much intended—and a person willing to train him in the arts of badassery. Needless to say, life has been good.

Then Lilian's family decided to pay a visit.

And everything went to hell.

Sometimes, life gives you lemons. Other times... well, you get the picture.

Rejection of a Shattered Soul

Chapter 8

Rejection of a Shattered Soul

Daphne woke up early on Monday morning, the first day of classes. She didn't have any classes that morning, but she did have a second period class. Today and Wednesday would be her fullest days.

After taking a shower and getting dressed, she, Tracey, and Blaise went to breakfast, where they met up with all of their friends.

"Good morning, Daphne, Tracey," Susan greeted them as they sat down at the Hufflepuff table. A glance around the great hall revealed that they were not the only ones who'd mixed tables. Ever since Harry first decided to change which table they sat at, the idea of befriending people from other houses had caught on.

Harry...

None of them had been able to see Harry Potter in the hospital wing. When they'd tried to see him, Harry had disappeared. According to Madam Pomfrey, Harry had been in good health and was let out of the hospital. None of them had been pleased, but they figured it just meant that they would see him later on.

Not so. Harry had disappeared. None of them knew where he'd gone, not even Neville and Astoria, who shared the Gryffindor dorms with him. For all intents and purposes, Harry Potter was gone, even though he was still somewhere in Hogwarts.

"Daphne!" Astoria called out as she ran into the Great Hall. Neville was trailing behind her.

"Stori," Daphne greeted her sister with a hug. "Did you sleep well?"

"Hm!" Astoria nodded with a big smile on her face. "It's really comfortable here, and all of the girls are nice enough, though they like to ask a lot of questions."

"What kind of questions?" Daphne asked, looking at Neville, who shrugged.

"They kept asking me about Harry Potter," Astoria said as she put food on her plate.

"What did you tell them?"

"That I don't know anything about Harry Potter." Astoria shoved a spoonful of hot oatmeal into her mouth, moaning as she savored the flavor. "This is so good!"

"Our first class is care of magical creatures, isn't it?" Lisa said to Hannah.

"Yep." Hannah munched on some toast. "I wonder how that's going to turn out. You're not taking Care of Magical Creatures, are you, Daphne?"

Daphne shook her head. "I didn't think there'd be much point in me taking that class, since it's not something that could help me in the future."

"I'm excited for Care of Magical Creatures," Neville admitted.

"I didn't know you liked animals," Tracey said. "I thought you were a plant nerd."

"Thanks, Tracey," Neville said somewhat dryly.

"You have a real way with words," Blaise added.

"Urk! I-I'm sorry!" Tracey apologized. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Smooth, Trace," Daphne said. "Real smooth."

"Aww! Shut up!"

As the Great Hall became filled with more students, Professor McGonagall walked over to them. "Excuse me, but have any of you seen

Mr. Potter? I have been searching for him ever since he snuck out of hospital wing, but have had not had any luck."

So, even the teachers can't find him..

"I'm sorry, Professor," Neville started. "We haven't we haven't seen or heard from him since the end of last year."

"I see." Professor McGonagall sighed. "Well, if you see him, please tell him that I have his schedule and the device that he needs to attend them all."

Daphne wondered what device she was talking about, but the transfiguration professor left soon after receiving speaking with Neville.

"You know, seeing Professor McGonagall reminds me, but, where the bloody hell is Harry?" Tracey asked.

Daphne wanted to know the same thing.

XoX

First period that day was Care of Magical Creatures, an elective class that only third years and above could take. On Mondays, Gryffindor shared that class with Slytherin. That meant that Neville and Tracey were the only ones attending, since no one else was interested in taking this class. Even Tracey seemed more interested in getting an easy O.

After eating breakfast with their friends, he and Tracey parted ways and went out to Hagrid's hut, which was where the lessons were taking place. Hagrid had become the new Care of Magical Creatures professor. Neville heard rumors that the reason for this was because the old professor quit, stating that he "wanted to keep all of his remaining body parts intact."

"What do you think we're going to be learning, Nev?" Tracey asked.

"I don't know what sort of animals we'll be learning about, but knowing Hagrid's love of dangerous creatures, it's probably something that can bite our heads off."

"Ugh, yeah, thanks for that awesome visual imagery." Tracey shuddered.

They reached Hagrid's hut, along with the other students from Slytherin and Gryffindor who were taking this class. Neville noticed that Malfoy and his two goons were present. Harry was also absent, it seemed. While that didn't surprise him, it was disheartening.

Hagrid was waiting for them in front of his hut. While he wore his normal jolly smile, Neville thought the massive man also looked nervous. Considering this was his first time teaching, Neville didn't blame the man.

"Good mornin', class," Hagrid greeted them. "I yee've all had a chance to look at yer books."

"Look at our books?" Malfoy asked mockingly. "We haven't even been able to open the stupid things. How do you expect us to look at anything when that book attacks everything that moves?"

"Ye mean ye didn't stroke the spine?" Hagrid asked, beffudled, as if he'd thought the way to open the book should have been obvious. "'Ere, let me show ye 'ow it's done. Ye take the book just like this, then ye rub along the spine just like this."

Everyone watched Hagrid rub his finger gently along the book's spine, which made the entire thing relax, its pages opening like a blooming flower. Seeing this, Neville did what Hagrid showed them. He marveled as the book opened for him.

"Now, then, 'ave I got a treat for all of ye," Hagrid said, clapping his hands together. He seemed nervous. "If ye'll follow me to the back over here."

Everyone followed Hagrid as he led them around to the back of his hut. There, Neville and Tracey, along with everyone else, stopped dead in their tracks when they saw the pen full of creatures.

"Holy..."

"Are those griffins?" Neville asked.

"Naw, those aren't griffins," Tracey said. "They're hippogriffs."

At first glance, the creatures appeared to be eagles. It was only after looking at their hindquarters, that Neville realized they were half eagle, half horse. Wings sat retracted into their sides. Neville imagined they would look quite large when those wings were expanded. Currently, the herd appeared to be grazing.

"That was a good guess," Hagrid said, pleasantly surprised. "Five points ter Slytherin. Yep, these are hippogriffs. These creatures are closely related to the griffin, so it's been said. Hippogriffs are very proud creatures. They've got a mean temper if you don't show them the proper respect. Now-" Hagrid clapped his hands. "-who wants to ride one."

Everyone took a step back-except for Neville, who hadn't realized what was going on for several seconds.

"Uh..."

"Excellent job, Neville! Come here! Let's get you settled on a hippogriff!"

"Uh, no, I don't think that I-"

"Now, don't be shy! Come on!"

Hagrid slapped Neville in the back, sending him stumbling forward. He almost crashed into the ground, but he caught himself at the last moment. Standing up, Neville froze when he came face to face with a hippogriff.

"Easy there, Neville," Hagrid warned. "Don't make any sudden movements. Now, slowly-slowly! Bow. Remain bowed, but don't break eye contact. If he bows back, then you can get close and go up and pet him. If he doesn't, then back away slowly."

Neville followed Hagrid's instructions, bowing low while maintaining eye contact. Sharp yellow eyes pierced him like spears. A cold sweat broke out on Neville's forehead. What if this didn't work? What if the hippogriff got angry and decided to crush his skull in? What if-

But there was no need to worry. Seconds later, the hippogriff bowed back.

"Ye see that!" Hagrid said. "He's giving ye permission ter pet him. Go on. Go on."

Neville tentatively stepped forward, wary of getting a pair of hooves to the face. However, as he reached out with his shaking hand, the hippogriff moved forward and allowed him to pet it.

"See that," Hagrid said. "There's a good Buckbeak. I think he likes you."

Neville felt more at ease now that the first contact had been made. He ran his hand down Buckbeak's head, enjoying the soft feel of downy feathers.

"Now, how about we have Buckbeak give you a ride," Hagrid suggested.

"What?" Neville said as if he hadn't quite heard Hagrid.

Unfortunately, before he could really figure out what was happening, Hagrid had lifted him onto Buckbeak's back, and slapped the creature's hindquarters.

Screaming like a little girl, Neville was launched into the air as the hippogriff took flight.

XoX

"Okay," Tracey said to herself, "That's pretty cool."

She watched as Neville and the hippogriff left the ground and soared into the air. She could still hear Neville's screams echo for a few seconds before fading. While he'd sounded frightened, terrified even, she couldn't help but think that the whole thing, riding on the back of a hippogriff, looked like a lot of fun.

"I'm beginning to regret not offering to be the first one who did this."

Several minutes after he'd left the ground, Neville returned on the back of the hippogriff. His hair was in disarray, his eyes were wide, and his cheeks looked sunburned. He was still smiling.

"How was it?" Hagrid asked.

"Brilliant," said a breathless Neville.

As a shell-shocked Neville stepped into the crowd of gathered students, Hagrid beamed and clapped his hands.

"So, who wants ter try next?"

Whereas before, no one wanted to get near the hippogriffs, this time, he had no shortage of volunteers. It seemed as if the idea of riding on a hippogriff's back was too tempting an opportunity to pass up. While everyone else went to have their turn, Tracey hung back with Neville.

"So... was it fun?"

"Yeah..."

"You sound a little breathless."

"Yeah..."

"Are you only going to say 'yeah?'"

"Yeah... no, sorry." Neville shook his head. "I'm still feeling a little out of it."

"That amazing, huh?"

"Let's just say that while I've got no talent for broom riding, I can actually see myself liking this."

"That awesome, huh?"

"Yep."

Hearing that, Tracey wondered if maybe she should try to ride one of the hippogriffs. She didn't really enjoy the thought of not being in control of where she flew, unlike Neville, so riding something that was sentient put a damper on her desire. However, it did sound like Neville had a lot of fun.

"You're not so tough are you, you stupid pigeon."

Before Tracey could come to a decision, Draco Malfoy stepped up to Buckbeak with a "I'm your better because I'm a pureblood" expression and taunted the animal. Buckbeak let out an annoyed shriek and reared onto its hind legs. Draco Malfoy only had enough time to scream in fright before the hippogriff came down-and hit nothing but air.

If Tracey hadn't been watching, she would have been shocked. Draco Malfoy flew several feet backwards, into the waiting hand of none other than Harry Potter, who'd appeared seemingly at random. Looking into the boy's dead green eyes, Tracey shivered.

"You have a poor habit of not listening to your teacher, Draco Malfoy. The next time a professor tells you something, you should take it to heart."

Harry didn't give Draco time to answer. He dropped the boy onto the ground and walked up to Buckbeak. The reaction was almost instant. Upon Harry getting closer, Buckbeak calmed down and bowed to him. Harry returned the bow with a nod and began stroking Buckbeak's feathered neck.

"Well," Hagrid said, trying to get back on track. "Who wants to ride on a hippogriff next?"

XoX

Susan, Daphne, Lisa, Terry, and Blaise were walking to Study of Ancient Runes. Hannah, Neville, and Tracey would have been with them, but they'd decided to take Divination. Daphne didn't know why Hannah or Neville had chosen such a crock of a class, but she knew that Tracey had chosen it because she wanted to get an easy A.

"Did you hear that Harry Potter was seen in Care of Magical Creatures?" Blaise said.

"I'd heard that, too," Susan said. "Several Hufflepuffs who took the class said they saw Harry Potter rescue Draco Malfoy from an angry hippogriff."

"Tracey was talking about it before we left for Study of Ancient Runes," Blaise added.

"I wonder what that means," Lisa muttered. "I mean, Harry hasn't been seen since school started, and now he suddenly shows up and rescues Draco Malfoy? That sounds really suspicious. You don't think something happened to make Harry an allie of Malfoy's, do you?"

Daphne wanted to scoff at Lisa for suggesting something so dumb, but before she could give voice to why that was a stupid idea, Susan did it for her.

"I don't think Harry would ever become Malfoy's allie. What happened in Care of Magical Creatures sounds more like Harry acting on a whim than him becoming someone's allie."

"What makes you say that?" Asked Terry.

"Because Harry's already spurned Malfoy once," Daphne stated. "Even if Harry decided to become an ally of Draco Malfoy's, there's no way Malfoy would accept it, especially not after everything that's happened between them."

Susan nodded and continued where Daphne left off. "It also doesn't make sense for Harry to become an ally of Malfoy's anyway. He's already made allies with several light families. If he suddenly switched allegiances, it would put all of the work that went into allying himself with people like the Bones and Longbottoms worthless."

Lisa grimaced. "I don't really like how that makes it sound like we're just stepping stones in Harry's attempt to gather allies."

Daphne shrugged. "I'm almost positive that's what he thought of us at first. But it doesn't matter. That might have been his goal in the beginning, but it hasn't been his goal for awhile."

"And how do you know that?" Terry asked.

"Because a Greengrass can't afford to let herself be caught off guard, not even by someone she's friends with," Daphne said.

They entered a large circular room with a high ceiling. Several desks were arrayed in a tertiary arrangement, meaning each desk was situated higher than the one before it. Desks seated three people, so Daphne sat with Susan and Lisa, while Blaise and Terry sat next to Justin Finch Fletchley.

There were several other students with them, a mixture made up of mostly Ravenclaws and Slytherins. There weren't any Gryffindors around from what Daphne could see. Her eyes slid over one section of the room, and then moved to another. Disappointment set in. She'd been hoping to see Harry in this class, as it seemed like something he'd enjoy taking.

A door opened on the far side of the room, opposite where they'd entered, and a woman walked in. Professor Babbling, her hair in disarray, with curly strands falling out from underneath her hat, walked down to the podium at the bottom of the classroom. Her dark blue robes swished as she moved to a sudden standstill.

"The study of ancient runes is one of the most theoretical magics you will ever learn. Runes are the letters in a set of related alphabets known as runic alphabets, which were used to write various Germanic languages before the adoption of the Latin alphabet and for specialised purposes thereafter. The earliest runic inscriptions date from around 150 AD. The characters were generally replaced by the Latin alphabet as the cultures that had used runes underwent Christianisation, by approximately 700 AD in central Europe and 1100 AD in northern Europe. The three best-known runic alphabets are the Elder Futhark, the Anglo-Saxon Futhorc, and the Younger Futhark."

Professor Babbling was apparently not one to get caught up in fancy introductions. From the very get go, her introduction consisted of, not an intro, but a lecture. Daphne sat with a quill in hand, jotting down notes as quickly as she could. Beside her, Lisa and Susan were doing the same.

"There are, naturally, other runes that are used. However, for your third year, we'll only be focusing on these three, as they are the most commonly used runes."

As the professor continued her lecture, Daphne glanced at the others out

of the corner of her eyes. Sitting with a perfectly upright posture, Lisa jotted down notes efficiently with her quill. Susan was slouched somewhat, and she used a calligraphy pen instead of a quill, but her note taking was no less swift.

"Anglo-Saxon runes are an extended version of Elder Futhark. They consist thirty-three characters. It is thought that they were used to write Old English / Anglo-Saxon and Old Frisian from about the fifth century AD. They were used in England until the tenth or eleventh centuries, though after the ninth century they were mainly used in manuscripts and were of interest to antiquarians, and their use ceased after the Norman conquest in ten-twenty-six."

It seemed the first class was not going to be an overview of what runes were or did, but the history behind their creation. Daphne wondered if there was some purpose in that. Wouldn't it have been better to show everyone what runes could accomplish, and then begin lecturing on this? However, the class soon passed, and Daphne hadn't learned a single thing about how runes worked, though she did know plenty on their history.

"Now, then, your homework today is to write a ten inch essay on one of the three runic alphabets that I just told you about," Professor Babbling said. "It's due at the beginning of next class. Oh! And Harry Potter, I would like you to stay after for a moment."

Harry?!

At her friend's name being called, murmurs broke out around the room. Daphne searched for her friend, for Harry, and she eventually found him.

When did he get here?

Harry was sitting on the top row, in a seat about as far from everyone else as possible. At his name being called, Harry looked up, and though his eyes were too far for her to see, a shiver still passed through her when he glanced down at the teacher. He didn't say anything. He just stood up and walked down to the teacher, who actually appeared nervous for some reason.

"Susan," Lisa muttered.

"I know. It's really Harry," Susan said.

"What should we do?" Asked Blaise.

"Let's wait outside of class," Daphne suggested. "Harry will have to exit that way, and when he does, we can finally confront him about why he's been ignoring us."

"That's a good idea, Daph," Susan agreed.

Finding a place just outside of the runes classroom, the group waited until Harry was finished speaking with the professor. It took longer than expected, but he eventually emerged from the classroom.

"Harry!"

She and the others walked up to Harry, who, upon noticing them, spun around and went in the opposite direction. Daphne ran to catch up. She turned a corner-and then stopped when she came upon an empty hallway.

Harry Potter wasn't there.

XoX

"What do you mean Harry just disappeared?" Tracey asked as they all sat down for lunch.

Daphne sat with Susan on her left and Astoria on her right. Hannah and Terry were also on her side. Tracey was sitting opposite her, along with Neville, Blaise, and Lisa.

It was lunch period. She, Tracey, and Blaise had just finished their third period class, which had been Transfiguration. Professor McGonagall had been the same as always. During class, she and the others had listened to Professor McGonagall give a lecture on animagi, and the difficulty of becoming one. She hadn't seen Harry again, but Gryffindor didn't share transfiguration with Slytherin this year.

"Exactly that, Trace," Daphne said. "Harry Potter appeared in class. We tried to follow him after class. He disappeared."

Susan nodded. "I don't really know how he did it. We followed him around a corner, but he'd vanished by the time we turned. What's more, he didn't have his invisibility cloak on him."

"He could have had it in his bookbag," Lisa pointed out.

"No, he didn't have his bookbag with him," Susan said, shaking her head.

"What do you think we should do?" Asked Neville.

"I think we need to confront him, and force him into telling us why he's avoiding us." Tracey slammed her left fist into her right palm. "Even if we have to beat it out of him!"

Everyone stared at Tracey for several seconds, until the girl squirmed underneath the attention of so many flat-looking eyes, and then they looked back at each other.

"Okay. So, does anyone have a feasible plan to confront Harry?" Terry asked.

"I hate you all," Tracey grumbled.

"We definitely need to confront him," Blaise said. "However, we'll have to do so in such a way that he can't escape."

"Slytherin shares fifth period with Gryffindor," Neville said. "During that time, we'll have four people. If we can surround him before he can escape, then we can get him to talk."

"Yeah!" Tracey cheered. "And if talking doesn't work, then we can let our fists do the talking!"

"Since when have you been so violent?" Terry asked.

Daphne listened to all of her friends suggestions, and while a part of her agreed with them, another was worried. Somehow, she didn't think this

would turn out the way that any of them expected.

XoX

The Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom looked a lot different than it had last year. Last year, the DADA classroom had been pomp and decorative, filled with moving portraits of curly blond hair and the dazzling smile of an idiot. This year, it looked more like a plain classroom-except all of the desks had been placed against the walls and only a single armoire stood in the center of the room.

Standing behind a desk as Daphne and the others walked in, Professor Lupin looked the picturesque image of a professor-even if he was shoddily dressed.

"I would like to welcome all of you to your third year of Defense Against the Dark Arts," Professor Lupin said. "My name is Remus Lupin, and I'll be your instructor for the foreseeable future."

I think Professor Lupin might be the most normal teacher we've had for this class, Daphne thought to herself, frowning as she looked around the room. *Harry's not here.*

"Before we start the lesson, allow me to give you a brief overview of what we're going to learn," Professor Lupin continued. "During this year, half of our focus is going to be on learning more about dangerous creatures-dark creatures such as werewolves, grindylow, and vampires. The other half is going to be spent learning defensive spells that can be used to defend yourself against these dark creatures. At the end of the year, I plan on giving all of you a practical test, which will show me how well you've learned everything that I've taught you."

Daphne didn't show it, but she was impressed by Professor Lupin's professional demeanor as he spoke. She'd never heard of him before. That meant he was a new teacher. However, despite being clearly new to teaching, he seemed to have a clear grasp of how to teach. His lecture was concise and to the point.

This year might actually be a good year for our class.

Last year, their teaching had been haphazard. Lockheart, their original teacher, had been a fraud. During the last few months, Kinglsey Shackbolt, an auror working for the ministry, had been their teacher. While he'd done an excellent job, there was only so much that could be taught in a few months. It hadn't been enough to make up for their lack of competent teacher the first three-fourths of the year.

"Now, then, since I'm not one for long-winded lectures, how about we start the year off with a practical lesson." As if his words had been a cue, the armoire shook, startling the students closest to it. "Can anyone tell me what's in there?"

No one spoke. Daphne studied the armoire curiously. There didn't seem to be anything special about it. Made from a type of redwood, the armoire seemed aging and worn, no longer pristine, but had become withered and decrepit, as if the merciless hand of time had struck it repeatedly.

It shook again, and Daphne frowned in thought. Something was inside of that armoire, a creature of some kind. But what sort of creature would hide inside of an armoire? There were only a few that she could think of. Going back to what she'd learned from reading a bit of this year's defense book, Daphne realized that only one of those creatures was in the book.

"A boggart?" She asked.

"Very good, Daphne. Five points for Slytherin." Smiling, Professor Lupin gestured to the armoire. "Yes, there is a boggart inside of there-and you are all going to learn how to defeat it."

"A boggart is an amortal shape-shifting non-being that takes on the form of the viewer's worst fear. When facing a boggart, it is best to have someone else along, to try to confuse it, since facing more than one person at once would make it indecisive as to what form it must take, usually a mixed-up amalgam of the victims' fears. Because of their shape-shifting ability, no one knows what a boggart looks like when it is alone, as it instantly changes into one's worst fears when one first see it."

Daphne felt a slight shiver crawl down her spine. Perhaps it was because of what she feared the most, but the idea of something that could change

into what she feared gave her chills.

"Now, before all of you become too fearful, a boggart does have one major weakness-laughter." While several people snorted, Professor Lupin smiled wryly. "You might think I am joking, but I'm really not. Laughter is the ultimate defense against a boggart. And why? Because boggarts, like most dark creatures, thrive on fear, and laughter is the antithesis of fear."

That... made an unusual amount of sense. Daphne didn't know much about boggarts, but she knew that when something relied on a method to harm others, the opposite was usually its weakness-at least for magical creatures. It was like how creatures that used darkness, the element and not the art, were weak to light. She didn't know if laughter could be considered a true weakness, but she was willing to give Professor Lupin the benefit of the doubt.

"The trick to defeating a braggart lies in this spell, and I want you all to pronounce it for me... Riddikulus. Come on, everyone. Say it with me. Riddikulus."

She and the others all spoke at the same time. The word sounded odd, like someone trying to turn an English word into Latin. Still, ridiculous-sounding or not, this was apparently the spell that would defeat a boggart.

"Riddikulus!" Daphne and the other students said together.

"Excellent! Very good. Remember, the key to this spell isn't just in the word. You have to imagine something funny, something that'll make you laugh. Now, I think we've spent enough time practicing. How about we some practical experience by having all of you face a boggart... you!" Professor Lupin pointed to Tracey, who then pointed at herself. "Yes, you. What do you fear the most?"

Tracey looked down at her feet. "..."

"I'm sorry what was that?"

"I-I said it's..." Tracey mumbled the last part.

"I couldn't hear you. Could you be a little louder please?"

"I said it's having the Irish losing in this year's Quidditch World Cup!"

While the rest of class laughed at the beat red Tracey's declaration, Daphne could only facepalm. She knew that her friend was obsessed with quidditch, but for that, of all things, to be what she feared most? Her friend must have been more deranged than she'd realized.

"Well..." Professor Lupin also seemed surprised, but he was clearly willing to go with it. "That would, indeed, be a tragedy. I'm curious to know how the boggart will make you think the Irish lost this year's Quidditch World Cup. Let's find out!"

Professor Lupin waved his wand, the door to the armoire opened... and a person stepped out. He was short. Really short. He also wore only green, had a face nearly five times larger than his body, bright red hair, and a lot of freckles. It was a leprechaun.

He'd also been lit on fire.

And there was a knife protruding from his head.

What in Merlin's name...?

While Daphne felt somewhere between "*what the fuck?*" and "*who the hell would find this frightening?*" Tracey watched on in horror.

"Remember," Professor Lupin said, "think of something funny, point your wand, and say 'Riddiukulus.'"

The leprechaun walked toward Tracey, who raised her wand, which shook in her head. Tracey's breathing had grown labored. Her chest and shoulders heaved as if she was on the verge of hyperventilating. Daphne worried about whether or not her friend would be able to cast the spell.

"R-Riddikulus!"

Fortunately, Daphne's worry proved to be unfounded. Light shot from the tip of Tracey's wand and slammed into the leprechaun. The knife in its

head suddenly vanished, the fire evaporated, and the short creature started doing a silly jig. Many people in the class laughed. Tracey, the tension visibly easing from her shoulders, breathed a sigh of relief.

"Excellent work, Tracey! Well done! Take another five points to Slytherin!" Professor Lupin said. "Now, I want everyone to form a line. One at a time, each one of you will get your turn at defending yourself against the boggart. Remember, when the boggart turns into what you fear the most, think of something funny, aim your wand, and say 'riddikulus.'"

Daphne and the other students formed a line. Since Tracey had already gone, she moved to the back, while Blaise and Neville stood in front of her. The line slowly moved forward as people faced their greatest fear—a clown, a snake, an inferi—and made them look ridiculous by using the spell.

I wonder what my greatest fear is...

It wasn't something that Daphne thought about often, but now that she was being forced to confront it, she couldn't help but think about it. What did she fear the most? Her father? He was a frightening man, and she would be lying if she said that he didn't scare her. However, she didn't think that he was what she feared the most.

"Hey, isn't that...?" A voice asked up front.

"It is! It's him!"

"Harry Potter."

"Harry."

"It's the Boy-Who-Lived."

Daphne stopped her ruminations and looked up. Indeed, standing at the front of the line, having appeared out of nowhere, was Harry Potter.

XoX

Harry realized that what he was doing wasn't something that he should

have been doing. His goal had been to keep to the shadows, avoid others, and especially avoid his friends. He couldn't afford to have people look at him too closely. Beyond that, he also didn't want the people that he used to call friends to confront him.

However, he was curious. A creature that allowed one to confront their darkest fears? How could he not be curious. What sort of thing did he fear? Harry couldn't think of anything off the top of his head. He didn't fear death. All people died. He didn't fear Voldemort. That man wasn't worth fearing. What about those dementors? They were frightening, but it wasn't what they were that scared him. It was what they did. Was that the same thing?

So, he stepped up to the boggart, curious to see what it would transform into.

What it became was not something that he had ever expected-nor was it something that he wanted.

XoX

Daphne gaped with the others at the three people who'd appeared before Harry. She recognized them, even she'd never seen two of the people in real life.

The first one, and most easily recognizable, stood at the front of the other two. Long bushy hair cascaded down her head. She wore the standard robes of a Hogwarts student, and sitting on her chest, the Hogwarts motto was firmly displayed. It was Hermione Granger.

She didn't know the other two people, but Daphne had seen enough moving portraits to know who they were: James and Lily Potter. Harry's parents. Lily, with her long red hair and pale skin, was really beautiful. James, standing with his shoulders slumped, hands in his pockets, looking for all the world like he'd just woken up.

However, whereas, in all of those pictures, James and Lily wore the brightest smiles that anyone would ever see, here, those smiles were absent.

And in place of those smiles were the deadest, most expressionless faces that Daphne had ever seen.

XoX

For the first time in a long time, Harry felt scared. As he stared at Hermione and his long-dead parents, fear coursed through him.

He took a step back.

"Why?"

Their eyes questioned himself, accused him. He tried not to look at their faces, at their eyes, which demanded an explanation, an answer that he could not give.

"Why didn't you save me?"

Why? Why why why why? Though they did not speak, their dead eyes spoke for them, demanding to know why he couldn't save them, why he'd let them die. His parents, who'd sacrificed themselves to protect him. That wasn't how it should have gone. Harry was the chosen one, the boy who was prophesied to slay the dark lord. Killing Voldemort had been his responsibility. Yet he hadn't killed Voldemort, and his parents had died because he'd not been able to uphold his duty.

"Why did you let me die?"

Hermione. Her eyes stared at him, calling him a fraud and a phony, demanding that he explain why he hadn't saved her. Had she not been his friend? From the moment that he'd taken Hermione under his wing, he'd become responsible for her. It had been his duty to protect her, to keep her safe, but he'd failed. He was a failure. Fail fail fail fail.

"You failed to protect us..."

"N-no... I..." Harry tried to defend himself with words, but the words stuck in his throat. There was nothing he could say to them. He was a failure.

"You're a failure."

"I-I'm not... d-don't look at me... like that..."

"You've failed."

"I-I didn't..."

"You failed. You failed. You failed."

"S-stop it!"

Harry fell onto his knees. Cradling his head in his hands, he tried to block out the accusation, but they would not be blocked. They could not be blocked. They were inside of his head, taunting him, punishing him, forcing him to remember how he'd failed, that he was a failure who couldn't live up to the expectations placed on him.

"Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

Something inside of Harry Potter broke.

XoX

Everyone stared in shocked silence at the scene unfolding before them. Harry Potter was lying on the floor, holding his hands to his head as he screamed himself hoarse. Even the teacher, Professor Lupin, appeared to have been frozen solid.

I-I need to do something.

The thought flashed through Daphne's mind, but much like the others, she, too, was paralyzed. It wasn't fear that stayed her hand. She wasn't afraid, but her joints had locked up all the same.

Come on, Daphne. Move. Move!

In the end, it was not Daphne who moved.

It was Neville.

"Riddikulus!"

Standing in front of Harry, the boggart changed into Professor Snape. With a flick of his wrists and a spell, Professor Snape was suddenly not wearing his robes. Instead, he was wearing the clothing of Neville's gran, complete with ugly magenta handbag and vulture hat.

Murmurs broke out amongst the students. Questions were asked. What had just happened? What was wrong with Harry? Why was he lying on the floor like that? Daphne had those same questions running through her mind. However, her greater concern was for Harry, who was still lying on the ground, quivering.

"Harry?" Neville said, kneeling down and placing a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Harry, are you all right?"

What happened next startled everyone. Neville was suddenly lifted off the ground as if someone had stuck him with a bludgeon. He flew through the air and hit the ground hard. In that time, Harry leapt to his feet and ran out of the room.

As Professor Lupin snapped out of his shock, his face pale and drawn, and tried to restore order, Daphne felt her heart go out to the boy who was suffering alone.

Harry...

XoX

Professor Lupin had dismissed class early that day and gone to report what happened to Headmaster Dumbledore. Susan had found out about what happened from Daphne and the others. Even now, hours after being told of the event, she still felt shocked by what happened.

Albus Dumbledore had personally questioned each student that had been present during the event, though Susan didn't know if anything had come of it. The staff had also been sent on an area wide search, and many students had been tasked with helping. However, no matter where they looked, they never found Harry Potter.

The time after dinner was free for all third years. Susan had asked everyone to follow her to the All-Commons Room.

During his second year, Harry Potter had created a common room where all houses could gather. It was a large space filled with comfortable armchairs, tables, bookshelves, and a variety of games both magical and non-magical. There were already several people when they arrived. A couple of older students sat at the tables, a mixture of all four houses. It sounded like they were discussing their homework. Sitting on the floor several meters from the tables was a slytherin and a gryffindor. They were playing a boardgame.

Susan and the others wandered over to the armchairs, which sat next to a fireplace. Lisa cast a silencing charm over the area at her behest. She didn't want anyone else to overhear their conversation.

"We need to help Harry Potter."

Her statement was met with a moment of silence.

"That goes without saying," Tracey said. "But that's easier said than done."

"Tracey's right, much as I hate to admit it," Terry said.

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"The biggest problem with helping Harry is that I don't think any of us even know how to help him," Lisa added. "We don't even know what the problem is."

"I know what the problem is," Daphne said softly. Everyone grew silent.

"Care to elaborate?" Blaise asked.

Daphne took a deep breath. "I'm sure most of you have noticed by now, but Harry, during our first year, seemed almost too perfect. Perfect grades. Perfect track record. Perfectly amiable. Second year was a little different, however, even though Harry let himself relax, he still did everything he could to show other people that he was perfect."

Susan hadn't really noticed that, but she wasn't as politically astute as Daphne. On this matter, she decided to trust her friend.

"I think Harry tried to hold himself to an unreasonable standard," Daphne continued. "When Hermione died, Harry didn't just lose a friend. He realized that he wasn't as perfect as he made himself appear to be. I think that, on top of losing a friend, caused him to shut himself down."

Tracey scratched the back of her head. "I don't really get it, but what you're basically saying is that Harry needs to have someone punch him in the face, right?"

"Works for me," Terry said with a shrug.

Tracey gawked. "Holy-did you just agree with me?!"

"Yes, though I'm loathe to do so."

"Keep saying that, jerk. You're going to find yourself agreeing with everything I say eventually."

"Whatever you say."

"I don't think a punch to the face will work," Susan said sternly. "What we need to do is find Harry and get him to let out all of the pent up frustration that he must be feeling right now."

"How are we going to do that?" Asked Lisa. "I mean, Harry is practically invisible right now."

"Don't forget that he can actually become invisible with that cloak of his," Blaise added. "He also knows the disillusionment charm."

"We also won't be able to find him in the Gryffindor dorms," Neville added. "I don't think he's been coming there, and if he has, then he's using magic to hide himself from everyone else."

"Or he's just coming in really late and leaving really early," Terry said.

"Or that," Neville admitted.

"Not only that, but we never see him in class either," Tracey added. "He's like a bloody ghost. We only see him if he lets us. I'm almost wondering if

he has some sort of layered charm to mask his presence or something."

"It could be enchanted clothing," Lisa suggested.

"I have no idea what that is," Tracey admitted. "But let's go with that."

Susan frowned as her friends spoke. The problem as she saw it was, first and foremost, finding Harry. They couldn't do anything to help him unless they knew where he was. He didn't appear to be sleeping in his dorm, which meant he'd found another place to reside. Of course, that brought up a lot of other issues. Where was he sleeping? How had he even found another place to sleep? Hogwarts might have been a massive castle, but there couldn't have been that many places for him to stay.

As her friends continued to try and figure out how to find Harry, Daphne Greengrass spoke up.

"I think I might know of a way to locate Harry, or at least, I know someone who can point us in the right direction."

Thus, Daphne explained her idea.

So, I actually meant to upload this a long ass time ago. I actually thought that I HAD uploaded this, but it seems I didn't. I'm not sure what I was doing, but I apologize for not publishing this sooner.

I'd like to thank everyone who's continued to read this series. The next chapter is the final chapter of Emo! Harry. I hope you're all looking forward to that.

Rescue

Chapter 9

Rescue

Harry Potter woke up early in the morning and left Hogwarts by using one of the secret passages that he had discovered. He had a meeting to attend outside of the school.

There was a field around Hogwarts that kept people from apparating in and out. If he wanted to reach his destination, he needed to be outside of the field. It wasted time, but sometimes, to get what he wanted, he needed to be patient.

The secret passage that he was taking had an exit point within Hogsmeade, in one of the shops near the border farthest from Hogwarts. Harry was wrapped within his invisibility cloak. He'd also thrown a muffling charm on his feet. This allowed him to easily slip outside, with the shopkeeper being none the wiser.

He was fortunate that the dementors were not allowed to enter Hogsmeade. Yet even so, an aura of depression hung over the tiny village. Desperation. Fear. Anxiety. Like a thick smog, these negative emotions polluted the streets.

What had once been a lively hamlet filled with friendly faces, now there was only a desolate street with a few people darting from one building to another, as if they were afraid of staying outside for too long. Harry ignored this, entered a small alley, and apparated, disappearing with nary a crack.

Apparating was not a pleasant magic. Whenever Harry used it, he felt like he was being forced through a very small tube, as if his insides were being squeezed, his body compressed. However, he had learned to deal with the discomfort. It only lasted for an instant anyway.

Seconds after apparating, Harry appeared in a small alley within Diagon Alley. He stashed away his invisibility cloak, put up the hood of his robes, and then stepped onto the main street and merged with traffic.

Because of the early hour, there weren't that many people present; he saw a couple of adults walking down the street and shopkeepers opening their stores. Above, on the second floor of several buildings, lights were turning on as people got a start to their day. He imagined it would get busy some time within the next few hours.

Harry's destination that day was Gringotts Bank. He had a meeting with Ragnarok.

The bank was mostly empty, as he had expected. Walking up to one of the tellers, Harry didn't even bother waiting for them to finish their task, but instead he placed a notification on the table.

"I have a meeting with Director Ragnarok."

The goblin stopped what he was doing—counting jewels, it looked like—glanced at him, and then looked down at the notification. From the widening of the goblin's eyes, he knew what this notification meant. He stopped everything that he had been doing and hopped off of the stool.

"Follow me."

Harry followed the goblin into the side passage that took him to Director Ragnok's office. The goblin knocked on the door once, received permission to enter, and walked inside.

Harry waited outside. He knew how this worked. The goblin would introduce him, and then Ragnok would let him enter. Protocol was important to goblins, even if time was money and standing around waiting wasted time.

"Director, the person you have an appointment with is here," the goblin said.

"Send him in," a voice said from inside.

The goblin came back out and held the door open. "Director Ragnok will see you now."

"Thank you."

Harry walked inside. The door shut behind him, leaving him alone with the director. As he'd expected, Director Ragnok was sitting behind his desk, leafing through documents. Harry didn't let this bother him and took the chair in front of the desk, waiting for Ragnok to finish. Unlike with the other goblin, he couldn't afford to be rude here.

"Lord Harry Potter," Ragnok began at last, "for what reason have you called this meeting?"

"I have a basilisk corpse," Harry got right to the point. "It's about fifteen meters long. I'd like to extract its organs and sell them as potion ingredients, and I'd like to sell the skin to clothiers."

"But you need manpower and professionals in potioning and physiology to extract the parts," Ragnok concluded. "Plus, you need a seller."

Harry nodded. "Yes. If you can supply me with the people to extract and someone to sell the basilisk parts to, I will split the money earned with Gringotts fifty-fifty."

Leaning back in his chair, Ragnok fixed him with a contemplative gaze. "That is a generous offer. However, I get the feeling that there is more to this than simply extracting potion ingredients from a basilisk."

"The basilisk is located at Hogwarts," Harry shrugged. "Within the Chamber of Secrets, to be exact."

Ragnok breathed through his nose. "That does make this difficult, then. As you know, we goblins are not allowed on Hogwarts ground without permission from the headmaster."

After the last goblin rebellion, a treaty had been made between the goblins and wizards. In return for having ownership of the bank that wizards used, the goblins were restricted from certain places. One of

those places was the Ministry of Magic. Another was Hogwarts.

Of course, this restriction could be circumvented if they received permission. Since the contract that kept them from entering was a magically binding one, verbal or written consent was required.

Words had power. Harry had heard this a lot in lectures and from books, and no one could deny the effects that words had on people. Hitler had spewed vitriol and incited a war that claimed many lives, countries had been toppled by the words of others, celebrities were defamed by gossip journalists, and royalty could have their heads placed on a chopping block with a few well-placed rumors. Yes, words had the power to change the course of history.

Beyond the political machinations that a few well-placed words could cause, there were even more far-reaching consequences in the magical world. Words didn't just have power, they didn't merely affect the way people thought through rhetoric and charismatic individuals. Words were power. Some magical creatures could be defeated on words alone, such as the sphinx. Concepts, spells, runes, everything began and ended with words. In a magically binding contract such as the one that bound the goblins, words meant everything.

"Then in order to allow your people to enter, I would need to have Headmaster Dumbledore give you express permission."

"Yes."

That could be a problem. Harry didn't think the headmaster was wary of him, but asking for permission to let the goblins on school grounds would certainly arouse suspicion. What's more, if Harry asked Headmaster Dumbledore to let the goblins into Hogwarts, he would be asked to explain why, and he didn't want to reveal that he was using the Chamber of Secrets as his base of operations inside of Hogwarts.

"I will work on finding a way to get your people inside," Harry said at last. "In the meantime, I'd like you to put out feelers to find people who would be interested in acquiring basilisk parts."

"I'll get to work on that." Ragnok nodded slowly. "I already know a few

people who would be interested. However, if we're going to get the most out of this, then we'll want to get more people involved and put the ingredients acquired on a bid. Basilisk ingredients are rare, so if we play our cards right, we could make a killing. You said this basilisk was over fifteen meters long?"

"Somewhere around there," Harry said. "I haven't been able to measure it because its body was twisted, but I've estimated it to be between twelve to fifteen meters."

"That means it's an old basilisk," Ragnok murmured. "Only basilisks that live for at least a thousand years get to be that long. That means the magic inside of it is incredibly potent. If what you say is true, then we may be able to make upwards of several hundred million galleons."

Harry nodded noncommittally. He truthfully didn't care about making more money. His coffers were already quite full, and he was making even more money by investing in the non-magical stock market. His main goal in all this was to acquire basilisk ingredients for his own use. Harry also wanted to gather the skin to create magical resistant clothing.

I won't be able to get any work done while that corpse is in the chamber...

It was regrettable, but he supposed that was how things sometimes went. He could still do his more formal studies, but any and all of his current projects required massive transmutation circles that would take up most of the floor.

"In that case, I'll get started on coming up with a means of getting your people into Hogwarts." Harry stood up.

"Very well. I'll send a list to you in one month's time of the people who have expressed interest in buying the basilisk ingredients," Director Ragnok responded.

"Then we have an accord," Harry said.

"Indeed."

Harry Potter left less satisfied than he had hoped. He wanted to get rid of that corpse, but it looked like that wasn't going to happen for a good while. Still, at least he was making some progress.

That didn't make him feel better, though.

XoX

Daphne's idea to confront Harry required people who were knowledgeable about Hogwarts. It was clear to her that the reason they hadn't been able to find Harry was because he knew the castle better than they did. He knew its secrets, its secret passages, and he used those to move around unobtrusively, invisibly. If they wanted to find him, then they needed to be capable of tracking him down despite this.

That was why she had Neville ask Fred and George Weasley for help, why she and everyone else were currently sitting in the All-Commons Common Room with the Weasley twins.

No one else was present. Daphne had set up a small ward so that people would shy away from the common room. This normally wouldn't have been possible, but she'd had some help from the house elves, who had, for whatever reason, agreed to aid them after Susan explained what they were doing.

Daphne had explained what was happening with Harry to the twins. They were surprisingly quiet as she spoke. Even their expression were a bit more serious than she would have thought possible. They didn't ask questions, they didn't speak, they just listened right until the very end.

"So that's what's going on," Fred said—at least, she thought it was Fred.

"We knew that Harry was having issues of some kind," George added.

"But we could never figure out what."

"I guess now we know."

"Wait," Blaise cut them off. "How did you two know that something was going on with Harry?"

"You mean aside from his moody attitude and the fact that he's no longer living in the Gryffindor Dormitory?" George retorted. Under such flawless logic, Blaise could only blush. "That's simple."

"It's because he's been leaving Hogwarts," Fred finished.

Leaving Hogwarts? Harry had been leaving Hogwarts? She hadn't realized that such a thing was possible, but when she thought about it, Daphne understood that there were probably secret passages that lead outside of Hogwarts' grounds. It wouldn't have surprised her to discover that Harry knew several passages out.

"Can you tell us what passage he's been using to leave Hogwarts?" asked Susan.

"We can, but I'm not sure it'll do much good," Fred said.

George nodded. "We've only been able to catch him on occasion, and only when we're actually looking for him. It seems that Harry is being really cautious. He changes the passage that he uses to leave Hogwarts every day, and he always returns from a different passage."

"He also doesn't have any set pattern," Fred added. "Some days he might use one passage, and then go a week without using it again. Because there are so many passages at Hogwarts, determining which one he's going to use before he actually uses it is impossible."

"He's being awfully paranoid."

"Indeed, Forge. Indeed."

Caution did fit with Harry's modus operandi. Daphne had noticed it before, in his politics, in his views, in how he expressed himself. Even if he had radical beliefs that shook the wizarding world, he was cautious in how he presented them, making sure to gather suitable evidence to support his beliefs before doing anything. It seemed that this caution extended to his other activities as well. No, it seemed as if Harry was being even more cautious than he normally was.

What Daphne wanted to know was: Why? Was Harry doing something

illegal, something that warranted caution? Well, leaving Hogwarts was against school rules unless it was for a planned trip to Hogsmeade, or the student had permission, but then that didn't answer her question: Why was Harry leaving Hogwarts? What was he doing?

"Then how are we supposed to find him?" asked a frustrated Tracey.

"It does seem rather hopeless," Lisa added. "If we can't figure out where he's going to be and intercept him, then Daphne's plan won't work."

Daphne bit her lip. She'd been betting on the idea that they would be able to predict where Harry was going to be. Then they would intercept him, force a confrontation, and make him confess his problems so they could help. However, if they couldn't figure out where he was going to show up, then confronting him would be impossible.

How frustrating.

"How do you two know which passages Harry's been using?" Astoria suddenly asked.

Everyone else stopped what they were doing and looked at the youngest girl there. She was sitting beside Luna, who they'd met up with again about a week after school started. The two of them seemed to have hit it off, perhaps because they were both younger than everyone else.

"Excuse me?" Fred asked.

"Since you know which passages Harry has been using to leave Hogwarts, it means you have a method of tracking people," Astoria said. "The only way you could track Harry was if you had something that allowed you to. What is it? How are you able to locate him?"

Daphne was startled, not that Fred and George had a method of tracking Harry, but that Astoria had figured that out. The thought had never occurred to her. Judging from the flabbergasted expressions of her friends, it had never occurred to them either.

Fred and George looked between each other. Their brows were furrowed as if undergoing a silent debate.

"She's asking about the magical device you have hidden in your robes," Luna added, pointing at George.

"How did she..." Fred started.

"... Know about the Marauders Map?" George finished.

"I do not know what this 'Marauders Map' that you speak of is." Luna shrugged. "But the nargles are buzzing around your robes. That normally means you have a strong magical item on your person, or you have a strong magic, but these nargles are centered around a specific spot. That means it has to be a magic object."

Everyone gawked at Luna like she'd suddenly sprouted horns from her head. Luna had been something of an oddball since Harry befriended her, but her eccentricities seemed to become more apparent as time went on. In the end, Daphne decided that this must be another quirk of hers.

She looked back at Fred and George. "Do you have a magical item that will let us locate Harry?"

Again that look appeared on their faces, the one that said they were debating on what they should tell her and the others. She wanted to force the answers out of them. However, she knew that she couldn't. Doing that would have been wrong. Besides, the Weasley twins were devious tricksters who bowed to no one. If she tried to force the issue, she and everyone else would likely be preyed upon with humiliating pranks.

"All right," George said, reaching into his robes.

"We'll show you our greatest treasure," Fred added.

"But you have to promise not to tell another living soul."

It went without saying, but everyone promised not to tell anyone about whatever they learned here. With that, George pulled something out of his robes and set it on the table.

Old parchment, that was the first thing that Daphne noticed. It looked like

a folded piece of old and faded parchment. Yellow and crinkled, there was no way of knowing its age, but however old it was, Fred and George handled it like it was the most sacred of treasures.

Fred carefully unfolded the parchment. Its total length was nearly five times larger than when it had been folded. There didn't seem to be anything special about it, though Daphne knew better than to just assume. If Fred and George had it, then it was something to be wary of.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," George said as he pressed the tip of his wand against the parchment.

Several gasps sounded out from all of her friends. Daphne didn't blame them. The parchment, which had appeared old and worn, suddenly transformed. Words appeared along the parchment, names, Daphne realized. Moony. Wormtail. Padfoot. Prongs. They were not names that she knew. Yet the names soon vanished and were replaced with something else, something even more astonishing.

For depicted on the parchment was a highly detailed map of Hogwarts.

No. It's more than just a map, Daphne realized.

Located on the map were names, quite a few of which she recognized. Headmaster Dumbledore was in his office, and so was Minerva. The other teachers were located throughout the school, and there were the names of many students who she knew wandering the halls. What's more, all of the names were moving. In other words...

... this map tracked where everyone in the school was at any given time.

"That's amazing!" Tracey said. She seemed to be the only one capable of voicing her thoughts, not that anyone disagreed with her.

"Isn't it?" Fred said, sounding quite proud.

"Now you see why this is our greatest treasure?" asked George.

Daphne could certainly see why they coveted this item so much. A map that could tell you exactly where everyone in the castle was would be a

boon to anyone. It also explained how Fred and George were able to create such elaborate pranks without anyone catching on.

She also had to marvel at the magic that must have gone into creating this map. She couldn't begin to guess at what sort of intricate spells had been cast on it, whether it had been created by runes, or if it had been enchanted. This sort of magical device went well beyond what they would learn at Hogwarts.

Harry would love to get his hands on this.

The moment she thought about Harry, sadness welled up inside of her as the strings of her heart were yanked on. However, that sadness soon turned into determination.

She didn't know what was wrong with her friend, but she and the others were going to get him back.

The old Harry that meant so much to her.

XoX

Two weeks passed since Harry had met with Director Ragnok. During that time, Harry hadn't had any success in figuring out how to get the goblins into Hogwarts. He couldn't just sneak them in. The problem was the magic that bound them to the contract. If they attempted to sneak into Hogwarts, the barrier that surrounded this place, the same one that stopped people from apparating, would repel them and alert the headmaster.

That wouldn't be good. It would be especially bad if he got caught. Harry didn't want Headmaster Dumbledore finding out about the basilisk, or the Chamber of Secrets.

Sitting in the Chamber of Secrets, on a chair that he had created from alchemy, Harry looked at the writings on his desk. They were his notes on the barrier that surrounded Hogwarts. He found that writing sometimes helped him think, and this particular subject was something that required a lot of thought.

There wasn't much information on the barrier, not its mechanics nor how it worked. From what little was written about it in the books that he had found within the Forbidden Section of the library, the barrier had been created by all four of Hogwarts founders. Ravenclaw had designed it, Hufflepuff had built it, Slytherin had initiated it, and Gryffindor had powered it. The four greatest wizards of all time had created this together, and it had only grown more powerful since then.

According to the books he had... borrowed, every headmaster who came after the four founders was responsible for adding something to the barrier, strengthening it. It was like something of an unwritten rule. This was done not only to help protect the students, but for the new headmasters to prove that they had what it took to be the headmaster.

Unfortunately, there was no information on what the previous headmasters had added to the barrier. There wasn't even any information on what the original barrier did. The only thing that Harry knew was that the barrier didn't allow people to apparate so long as they were trapped within its sphere of influence, and that it kept goblins from entering.

Other dark creatures also couldn't enter. Vampires and werewolves were allowed, but dementors couldn't come near Hogwarts itself. That said, he'd discovered how far the barrier's range was.

The barrier had a diameter of nine kilometers wide and three tall. Harry wondered if these numbers had been taken into account during its creation. Three was a magically powerful number. Nine was divisible by three. Of course, that didn't account for the total, but perhaps there was more to magical numbers than he had realized.

While he was trying to determine how he'd help Ragnok's people get past the barrier, a loud, obnoxious ringing filled his ears. It was the alert from his mirror. Sirius was calling. With a grimace, Harry summoned his mirror and activated it with a magical word. The mirror distorted, shimmered, and then revealed the face of Sirius Black.

His godfather looked a lot better than the last time he'd seen him. Gone was the hollow face and sunken eyes. That meant Sirius was still taking his potions, just like he'd told him to. That was good.

"Sirius, what are you calling me for? Has something happened?"

"I think I should be the one asking that?" Sirius said. "What is taking so long? Why hasn't Pettigrew been captured? Has something happened?"

"No, nothing has happened."

"Then what's going on over there? It's been nearly three weeks since school started. Shouldn't Pettigrew have been captured by now?"

Harry snorted. "You make it sound so easy. Capturing someone like Pettigrew isn't a simple matter. He might be weak, but he's cunning enough to have evaded detection for over a decade. What's more, he rarely leaves the Hufflepuff dorm."

Ron Weasley had recently been complaining about "Scabbers" not leaving the dorm room. Supposedly, the rat had disappeared somewhere inside of the dorm, and not even Ron knew where he was now. Even if he snuck into the dorm, finding a single rat in an unfamiliar location would be difficult. It wasn't even a certainty that Pettigrew was still present.

He could have left Hogwarts altogether.

The thought was not pleasant.

"Without any means of locating him, there's no way I can apprehend him," Harry concluded.

"What about the Marauders Map?" asked Sirius. "If you had that, then finding Pettigrew would be a snap."

The Marauders Map was a creation of Sirius and his dad. Well, technically, it had been created by Remus Lupin, but all four marauders had a hand in making it. If he had that map, then finding out where Pettigrew was would have been a simple matter, indeed. There was a problem with that, however.

"The map wasn't in Filch's office," Harry said.

"W-what? You serious?"

"About as serious as your name." Running a hand through his hair, Harry sighed. "I searched all through Filch's office and couldn't find it."

"Damn. That's not good. It means someone else must have it."

"Seems that way."

Harry did wonder who might have found the Marauders Map. He was placing his bet on the Weasley twins. No evidence pointed toward them having it, not hard evidence, but there was plenty of circumstantial evidence to support his theory, like how they never got caught with their pranks, how they could prank so flawlessly, how they always seemed to show up at just the right time. Yes, if they had the Marauders Map, it would explain how they could do everything that they did.

If I could search through their belongings...

But that would be hard. The Weasley twins were cunning, devious geniuses. Their luggage probably had traps. No. He shook his head. Even if they'd trapped their luggage, the Marauder Map would be somewhere on their persons. That meant he couldn't outright take it.

"You've got that look on your face," Sirius said.

"Excuse me?"

"That look," Sirius continued. "You have that look on your face that says you're planning to do something stupid. James often wore that look right before he and I got into trouble for doing something stupid, so I recognize it."

"I'm not James."

"No, you're not. You're more like your mom than you are James." A sardonic smile twisted Sirius' mouth. "Though you're not really like your mom, to be honest."

"Thanks for noticing."

"Smartass."

"Takes one to know one."

"Touche." Sirius inhaled a deep breath, held it, and then exhaled it. "So, what's the plan?"

What was the plan indeed. Harry wasn't sure what he should do next. Well, he should look into getting his hands on the Marauder's Map, but that would require confronting the Weasley Twins. There was also the chance that they didn't have the map. What would he do if they didn't? He'd be back to square one.

"Don't worry," Harry said. "I'll think of something."

"I'm not sure how much confidence that inspires in me," Sirius said.

"Whatever. Later, Sirius."

Harry deactivated the mirror and sent it back to his luggage. He stood up and exited the Chamber of Secrets through one of several exits. This one was on the opposite side of the entrance that led to the girl's bathroom.

It was no surprise that the Chamber of Secrets had multiple passages leading out. He hadn't explored everything yet, but the chamber was filled with lateral passages that led to various places inside of Hogwarts. The exit that he was using took him into a room located behind the Great Hall.

If I was Fred and George Weasley, where would I be?

Pondering this question as he cast a disillusionment charm over himself, Harry exited the room, walked through the Great Hall, and then headed for the stairs. His necklace clinked against his chest. It would have done an adequate enough job of keeping people from noticing him, but he preferred having the added insurance of the charm.

The first thing he needed to do was ascertain whether Fred and George had the map. After that, it would be a simple matter to ambush them, knock them unconscious, steal the map, and erase their memories. However, first, he needed to verify that they even had the map.

As he was wandering down a hallway, two people entered that same hall

from a passage several meters away. It was Tracey and Lisa. While Lisa warily eyed their surroundings, Tracey was touching her ear.

"Are you sure he's here?" Tracey asked. "I don't see anyone."

Harry froze. Should he run? No, they couldn't see him. He was disillusioned. Plus, he also had his necklace. Even if the charm wore off, the necklace should keep him from being spotted.

"In front of us?" Tracey continued. Lisa hadn't said anything. Who was she talking to?

"He's probably using a disillusionment charm or his invisibility cloak," Lisa said. "Ask them for his exact location."

"Directly in front of us, they said."

They were talking about him! Harry didn't know how they knew he was there, but when they both turned in his direction and raised their wands, he realized that they had somehow figured out his general location. He turned and ran down the corridor.

"Forté Visimo!" Lisa shouted.

A wave of energy washed over Harry, a sound akin to shattering glass echoed through the hall, and the charm that had been keeping him invisible vanished. The magic surrounding him was no more. Even his necklace sputtered as the magic from Lisa interfered with it.

"There he is!" Tracey shouted, pressing a hand to her ear. "We've found him!"

Harry gritted his teeth as he bolted down a corridor. Their shouts echoed behind him. They yelled at him, demanding that he come back. He didn't. He ran. He ran and ran and he kept running, bolting down corners and traveling up stairs. Footsteps echoed behind him—no. Wait. They were coming from his left!

Blaize and Terry rushed out from behind a set of armored suits. Their wands were already raised.

Twin jets of red energy shot from their wands.

The world became illuminated with red.

XoX

It had been decided that Daphne and Susan would be the ones to confront Harry. Everyone believed that they had the best chance of getting through to him—Daphne because of how close they were, and Susan because she'd become awfully stubborn since last year and insisted that she take part. If anyone could make Harry open up, it was them.

For the past several weeks, Daphne and the others had been gathering everything they would need to confront Harry. Their friend was powerful and cautious, some would even say that he was paranoid. They couldn't just go up to him. He'd avoided all attempts at contact, and she was sure he'd run if they tried to get close.

Thanks to the Weasley twins, they had some magic devices that acted similar to non-magical communication devices. They were experimental. To be honest, they didn't work very well. Static crackled in their ears, and they only had a range of 15 meters. They also only worked for about 10 minutes before breaking down. However, with them, they could at least communicate.

Daphne and Susan didn't have one. There were only few available. One had been given to each of the "pursuit groups," whose job it was to chase Harry. The Weasley twins had the last one. They were using it to keep all of the teams abreast of Harry's location at all times, and to direct them so they could funnel Harry to this location.

"Are you ready?" Daphne asked Susan.

"Yes." Susan nodded and went over to the door. The plan was for her to lock the door as soon as Harry entered and block his path, thereby ensuring that he would have nowhere to run.

After that, it would all be up to them.

XoX

Ragged gasps. Aching chest. Harry continued to run from his former friends.

It was more than just Tracey, Terry, Lisa, and Blaize now. All of the people he'd gathered, the allies that he had cast aside, plus a few others, were now chasing after him. They were around every corner, within every hallway. He didn't know how, but no matter where he went, there was someone waiting for him, blocking him, forcing him to take another route.

He knew what they were doing. They were trying to trap him. The problem was that he didn't know how they were doing it. He had no idea how they knew where he was. It was like they were predicting where he'd be, as if they were tracking him, but that was impossible, unless...

Unless they have the Marauders Map.

But there was no way they could have the Marauders Map, was there? But, if they had asked the Weasley twins for help, and Fred and George really did have the map, then...

I need to get away from them.

Harry ascended and descended stairs, rushed through corridors, and eventually found himself in the third floor corridor, the same corridor that had been forbidden in his first year. The Philosopher's Stone had been in this corridor.

"He's over here!" Tracey's shout reached him.

A moment of panic hit him. Harry rushed into the door where the trap door had been. It was still there. He locked the door behind him with a powerful magical lock, leapt down the trap door, and made his way deeper into the labyrinth. This place existed outside of Hogwarts. It was an extension created within the last two years specifically to hold the Philosopher's Stone. The Marauder's Map wouldn't be able to track him here because it hadn't existed when the map was made.

The hallway opened into a large dome-shaped room. Up ahead was the

door that Terry had opened by using his astrology knowledge. It was still there, closed now, a silent testament as to what happened here. Harry entered the room.

He wasn't alone.

"Hello, Harry," Daphne greeted. Her smile was kind, but Harry felt as if he'd been physically struck with terror.

He turned around to run away, but it was too late. The door had already closed. Susan was standing in front of it.

"We need to talk," Susan said, determination shining her brown eyes.

XoX

Daphne wondered if the ache in her chest, the feeling of something shattering, was due to the young man in front of her. Naturally, it was. However, that ache, which only grew stronger with time, seemed to be for so many more reasons than just him—though he was certainly the central figure, as all of her feelings right now revolved around him.

Harry looked... pathetic. His eyes were wide like a cornered animal's. He looked back and forth between her and Susan. She'd never seen him look so weak, so utterly wretched. This was not Harry Potter.

"Harry," Susan said, taking a step forward. "We wanted to—"

"Stay back!" Harry screamed, stumbling away from Susan. He turned around, as if preparing to run away, but Daphne was in that direction, and so he stopped moving.

"Why are you running from us, Harry?" Susan asked. "Why are you avoiding us?"

"Why?" Harry tried to snarl, to put on a strong front, but it was a lie. He was shaking with... what? Fear? No. Maybe it was desperation. "I'm avoiding you because I don't need you! I don't need anyone! The only person who I need in this world is me!"

His words might as well have been a blade. They cut through Daphne as surely as one. Susan, too, seemed to be deeply hurt by his words. However, unlike Daphne, who remained unable to move, Susan seemed to have renewed her determination from his words.

"That's not true," Susan said, taking another step forward.

Harry took a step back. "Don't come any closer!"

"I know that you don't mean that, Harry," Susan continued. "You're just confused. You lost your friend and now you don't know what to do."

"I don't have friends," Harry snapped. "I don't need friends! Having friends is pointless. They're a burden. They become close to you, worm their way into your heart, and then when they die, you're left with nothing! You become empty! I don't need that. If having friends means being a failure, then I'd rather not have any friends at all!"

Harry was rambling by this point. His words, feelings, and emotions were all jumbled together. Daphne could barely make heads or tails of what he meant. However, she understood one thing for sure. Harry was pushing everyone away to avoid getting hurt again. He had decided that if losing someone was going to hurt this much, then he'd break ties with everyone to keep from feeling this way anymore. That said...

This isn't the right way to live.

Daphne understood how Harry felt. They all did. However, what he was doing was wrong. He was wrong. How could they make him understand that?

"Harry, please calm down and talk to me. Talk to us," Susan said. She took another step closer.

That turned out to be a mistake.

"Stay away. Stay away. Stay away stay away stay away stay away stay away!"

She and Susan only a moment to realize that something was wrong.

Then, without warning, dark black smoke burst from Harry's scar. A fierce wind slammed into Daphne. However, it was more than wind. Daphne felt cold, alone, terrified, hurt, angry, mad, outraged, humiliating, ashamed, useless-disgusted-downtrodden-defeated-loveless-everything-hurt-and-he-just-wanted-to—

Gasping, Daphne clutched a hand to her chest as emotions and thoughts poured into her as if she was an empty vessel waiting to be filled.

Harry! These are Harry's emotions!

That black miasma pouring out of Harry's scar carried with it all of the emotions that Harry was feeling. Suddenly, Daphne understood. Harry wasn't just taking Hermione's death hard. It was more than that. There was a burden on his soul that she couldn't comprehend, a wound that had only widened with Hermione's death. It was as if his very soul had suffered terrible damage, as if it had been hanging by a thread and Hermione's death had been the cutting curse that severed it.

On the other side of the room, Susan Bones was shivering. She must have been feeling the same thing that Daphne felt. Daphne could barely see the girl past the black miasma, but if she was feeling it, then her friend must have felt it, too.

I need to do something...

Harry was suffering from something. There was more to this than merely being hurt and angry. This black miasma wasn't natural. Something had to be done, or Harry might end up being hurt even more. And yet...

I-I don't know what I should do...

What could she do against this strange power, which had rendered her all but powerless? She couldn't move, she could barely think, even breathing was a chore. All she could do was crouch on the ground and shiver. Her body had been rendered inert by the bombardment of emotions that were not her own.

Someone... please... help Harry...

Just as she was thinking about how hopeless this situation was, a burst of light appeared before her. Hot blue flames exploded into existence, and a cry not unlike that of a bird echoed across the room.

Warmth. Daphne could only describe it as that. A strange warmth filled her chest. It then spread outward, across her body, engulfing her in what felt like a protective dome, a warm blanket.

The dark miasma was blown away. For just a moment, Daphne thought she saw a giant bird with white and blue feathers, but it disappeared before she could blink, making her wonder if she had just imagined it.

Harry stood in the middle of the room. However, as she watched him, his knees buckled and he began to fall. She scrambled to her feet and rushed to his side before her mind could tell her body to move. Susan must have had the same experience. She was at his side at the same time. They caught Harry before he could fall, though his weight caused them to nearly topple over as well.

"Harry? Harry?" Daphne called out Harry's name.

"Why?" Harry whispered. "Why do you two keep persisting? Why does everyone keep hounding me? I just want to be alone."

"No, you don't," Susan rebutted. "You don't want to be alone. Let us in. We can help you."

"We want to help you," Daphne added.

He didn't respond with words. However, an arm wrapped around Daphne and pulled her close. Her robes soon became stained with tears. Susan looked up at Daphne, her face only a few centimeters away. The expression that she wore seemed to hold a statement.

I think we should let him get it all out, it seemed to say.

I agree. Daphne nodded.

Since they were both being held by Harry, they had no choice but to awkwardly seat themselves together and hold him at the same time. It

was uncomfortable, but now, at least, they allowed Harry to shed all of the tears that he'd been holding since long before any of them had ever met.

XoX

There was no telling how long they'd been down there, in that room, shedding tears. Time had become meaningless, an ephemeral existence with no purpose. However, even if time itself seemed to no longer hold sway, Harry did calm down... eventually.

"I'm sorry you had to see me like this," Harry muttered.

He was embarrassed by his unsightly display. It was disgusting. Harry was supposed to be composed. Harry was supposed to be perfect. He wasn't supposed to bawl his eyes out like a child.

"What are you talking about?" asked Susan. "There's no need to apologize. We're here to help you."

"Susan's right," Daphne said. "You're always helping everyone else, but that means there's no one who can help you when you're in trouble. We... want to be the people who help ease your burden. We want to be there for you."

Harry didn't want to admit it, but their words made him happier than he thought they should have. He felt light. At the same time, their words made him feel more self-conscious than normal.

For years now, Harry had done his best to present a perfect front, to be strong and intelligent and wise. He helped those needed him. He got perfect grades. He always lent a smile and an ear. He was the person who everyone looked up to.

In other words, he had strived to become the perfect human. He needed to be perfect. To accomplish his goals, to achieve his dreams, anything less than absolute perfection was unacceptable. If he couldn't be a perfect being, then how could he accomplish anything?

That was also why Harry had always kept a certain distance from

everyone, even friends—until recently, at least. He had kept friends at arm's length because he couldn't let them see anything except his perfect side.

That had changed after coming to Hogwarts. Before, Lisa Crawft had been the only one that he had opened up to. Now he had several friends who'd seen sides of him that he hadn't meant to show. He didn't think it was a bad thing at first, but then Hermione had died, and Harry had realized that letting himself get too close to people had more downsides than he'd thought. That was why he'd attempted to distance himself from everyone, why he'd forsaken them, though it didn't look like that had worked.

"Are you feeling better, Harry?" asked Susan.

"Yeah... I am feeling a bit better. Thanks to you two."

Harry didn't really understand how, but he did feel a lot better. His mind was more clear than it had been in months. He could think without fear. His own insecurities, his fears, were no longer whispering in his ear. The voice, the one that he'd heard since Hermione's death, was gone.

"It was no problem," Daphne said softly. "You're important to us. It's only natural that we would help you."

"Mm, I guess."

Harry wasn't sure when it had happened, but sometime while he'd been crying, Daphne and Susan must have moved. They were no longer in the middle of the room, but leaning against the wall. Harry was sitting on top of them. He felt like a small child being cradled by his parents. While his legs were resting on Daphne's lap, he was actually sitting on Susan, who was cradling his head to her chest. Her heart beat a steady pulse against his ear.

"Harry, can you please tell us why you were acting like that?" asked Susan. "You don't have to if you don't want to, but it might help you if you talked about it with someone."

Psychologically speaking, Harry knew that Susan was right. He'd read

enough books on psychology to understand the concept of baring one's soul to another as a form of therapy. Still, he was hesitant. Harry had always kept his thoughts and feelings to himself. It was to help him present that perfect front, a method of pretending that he was perfect.

However, maybe he should tell these two. Harry was beginning to realize that he might need to talk to someone. He wasn't sure how long he could hold some of these emotions in. Perhaps that was a side effect of having spent his entire life keeping everything to himself. Eventually, little by little, the will began to break down, leaving him vulnerable. In some ways, it was like what happened to Daphne back during their first year at Hogwarts.

"To be honest, I'm not one-hundred percent sure I know exactly what came over me," Harry admitted. "When Hermione died, I was hurt and angry and confused, but more than anything else, I hated myself for not having done more to protect her. If I had been more proactive, if I had tried harder, If I had solved the mystery behind the Chamber of Secrets instead of telling her to leave it be, she wouldn't have died."

It was the duty of those in charge to protect the people under them. Harry had been the leader of their group, the one everyone followed. He should have been protecting them, but instead he'd decided to not do anything under the assumption that, whatever was happening with the opening of the Chamber of Secrets, it had nothing to do with him. He'd acted selfishly. That selfishness had caused Hermione's death.

"All the people who've been close to me that were killed, they all died because of me," Harry whispered. "My mom and dad were killed because Voldemort had gone after me, and Hermione died because the person who'd opened the Chamber of Secrets had been after me as well. I told Hermione not to get involved because it wasn't any of our business, but it was my business. My negligence got her killed."

"You can't think like that, Harry," Susan said. "She didn't die because of you."

"She did," Harry interrupted. "She died because someone had come after me, and they killed her to get my attention. If I had just worked toward

solving the mystery surrounding the Chamber of Secrets, Hermione wouldn't have died."

Susan didn't say anything. She likely didn't know what to say.

"I understand," Daphne said suddenly. "I understand what you're saying, and I know why you feel this way... but do you really think that Hermione would blame you?"

"I don't know. Maybe she would blame me."

Harry remembered what happened when he confronted the bogart. Even though he knew, logically, that his parents and Hermione were not the kind of people who would blame him, his heart told him otherwise. It told him that they did blame him, that they held a grudge against him for living when they had died.

If only I had been stronger...

If he had been stronger, this wouldn't have happened. If he had been more powerful, they wouldn't have died.

"Don't be stupid." Susan karate chopped him on the head. Harry yelped. "Hermione wasn't that kind of person. She would never blame you for what happened. You can't think like that."

"I know that," Harry whispered. "I know that," he said more loudly. "I know that, but I..."

Two sets of arms wrapped around him. Harry froze.

"You... hate yourself, don't you?" Daphne said suddenly. It sounded like a question, but it wasn't. "All this time, I wondered why you pushed yourself so hard, why you tried to change so much. That's the reason, isn't it? You hate yourself for something that you did in the past and now you're trying to atone for it. However, when Hermione died, it broke your will and caused you to isolate yourself."

Daphne wasn't wrong. Harry did hate himself. However, the reason he pushed himself so hard wasn't because he wanted to atone for

something. There was another reason, outside of atonement and self-loathing, that pushed him forward.

"Daphne, Susan." Harry looked up at his two friends. "Do you know what eidetic memory is?"

Goodbye Emo Harry. I wonder if anyone is as I am to be done with this part of my story. Writing emo Harry is hard, and it sucks. I don't much like emo Harry. He's not very fun to write. Damn you plot for forcing me to write this!

Anyway, I would like to thank everyone who managed to trough through this particular section of nasty. It wasn't pleasant to write, so I'm sure it wasn't fun to read either. That's why I appreciate all the people who've supported me.

Thank you for reading.

No Rest for the Broken Hearted

Chapter 10

No Rest for the Broken Hearted

Harry told Daphne and Susan everything. He informed them about eidetic memory, what it was, what having it meant for him. They learned about his past, his knowledge, his dreams and goals and desires. They learned about the darkness that lay within him.

And they accepted it. They told him that his past didn't matter, that the things he'd done, the horrible, inhumane acts he had committed against his family, didn't matter to them. This surprised him. He didn't know why, but it did. Still, hearing them tell him that it was okay meant the entire world to him.

That night, Harry had slept soundly for the first time in months.

Harry was woken up the next morning by incessant shaking and a familiar voice. "Harry? Harry? Come on, Harry. You should wake up now."

"Nnggg..." Harry groaned as he opened his eyes. Everything looked fuzzy. The world was a blurry mishmash of colors, until Harry blinked several times to refocus. Then the images sharpened, and he realized that someone was standing over him. "Neville?"

Harry tried to recall the events of the previous day. He remembered crying in Daphne and Susan's arms, remembered telling them all about his past and eidetic memory. However, his memories after that were blurry. He remembered a bunch of sights and sounds and smells, but it was like a film had been cast over his vision. There were dark spots, blank space. If Harry had to define it, it was like he'd been sliding in and out of consciousness.

He did specifically remember someone helping him walk. He could remember the feel of an arm around his waist, but that was it. Nothing

else came to mind.

The problem with eidetic memory, Harry lamented, was that you only remembered what you saw. You can't remember something that you didn't see. Also, because the memory was always seen exactly as you remembered it, if your vision was blurred by, say, exhaustion or tears, then all you'd get was a grainy image. It was the same if you passed out.

"What time is it?" Harry asked.

"It's a little after five in the morning," Neville said. "I woke you up because I thought you'd want to exercise."

Exercise...

How long had it been since Harry had properly exercised? He hadn't done any exercising since the end of the last school year. His teacher would have been ashamed of him.

"Right... I should exercise. Thanks, Neville."

"You're welcome, Harry." Neville tried for a smile, but it was more guarded than Harry remembered it being.

Harry slowly climbed out of bed. His limbs felt stiff. He'd been ignoring it since he felt like there were more important things to do, but now that he'd been reminded of how he'd neglected his body, he could feel how poor his physical condition was. His limbs used to be limber and flexible. Now they felt like wires stretched taut. They used to be strong. Now they were like limp noodles. He'd let himself go.

How shameful.

Waving a hand at his trunk, Harry summoned his gym clothes and put them on. Neville was still in the room. He was staring at Harry with a gaping jaw, perhaps because of the wandless magic. Harry thought about trying to cover up what he'd done without thinking, but in the end, he decided not to. He didn't want to lie to his friends anymore.

"Hey, Neville?"

"Y-yes?"

"I'm... sorry."

"Sorry?"

Harry rubbed his arm. "About the way I treated you and everyone else. It was wrong, and I'm sorry."

"Ah." Neville looked about as uncomfortable as Harry felt. "Don't worry about that. I know you were going through a rough patch. We all were, but you had it the worst."

While he appreciated Neville's compassion, Harry felt like his friend was trying too hard to be understanding. Part of him wished Neville would get angry. Perhaps if someone got angry at him, it would be easier for Harry to forgive himself for how he'd acted.

After getting dressed, he and Neville left the room quietly so as not to wake the others. They walked through Hogwarts, eventually reaching the entrance, where everyone that Harry had befriended was already waiting. Even Tracey Davis, well-known as the laziest among them, was up and ready.

"Look what the toad finally dragged in." Tracey wore a grin that nearly split her face in half. She was dressed in a pair of tight black shorts and a sleeveless green top. "I was wondering if we'd ever see you again."

Perhaps it was her demeanor, that teasing and gung-ho personality that she seemed to have retained despite everything that had happened, but Tracey's words and grin brought a smile to Harry's face.

"Yeah... sorry for worrying you."

"Heh... if you're really sorry, then you should make it up to me by giving me some tutoring later today."

Harry nodded. "I can do that."

While Tracey spoke, Daphne and Susan walked up to him. Like Tracey,

they, too, were dressed in workout clothes. Susan wore a surprisingly modern skort and a jersey, and Daphne was dressed in a pair of shorts and sleeveless tank like Tracey's. Harry concluded that the clothing Tracey was wearing belonged to Daphne.

"How are you feeling?" Daphne asked.

Harry gazed fondly at the girl. "Better, thanks to you two."

"We didn't do much," Susan said. "Anyway, let's go. You haven't been exercising, right? You need to regain your strength."

"Right."

It wasn't until Harry started jogging around the Black Lake that he realized how badly he'd let himself go. While not noticeable to most people, the difference in his performance now and several months ago appalled him. He was slower than he used to be, ran out of breath quicker than he used to, he couldn't keep a steady pace, and worse, his legs felt knock-kneed and weak. By the time he finished running 20 laps around the lake, his thighs and calves were screaming in protest.

"Are you okay, Harry?" Susan asked as she rubbed his back. He was hunched over, sweat dripping down his body. His breathing was heavy. He felt an ache in his chest, as if each breath taken was slowly driving nails deeper into his lungs.

"I'm... I'm fine..." he panted, grimacing. This lack of ability must have been a result of not exercising and inhaling all of those fumes from his potions. He'd taken precautions, of course, but it looked like those had only partially worked.

"Do you need a break?" asked Daphne.

Harry shook his head.

Even though he was out of shape, Harry still did his best to finish his workout. It hurt. His muscles were sore from having gone unused for several months. However, he pushed the pain and discomfort aside for the sake of regaining his former strength.

He even had Susan and Daphne help him stretch afterward.

"Gah!"

"H-Harry?!"

"A-are you okay? Maybe we should stop..."

"N-no. Let's keep going."

"B-but it looks like you're in pain."

"No pain, no gain."

Sitting on the ground, Harry was having Susan and Daphne help him stretch. Susan was behind him, her hands on his back as she pushed his torso forward. Meanwhile, Daphne was in front of him. She was holding his hands and pulling him toward her, thereby helping him stretch out his thighs. It hurt. Pain lanced his thighs and glutes like branding irons, but he forced himself to keep stretching. Regaining his limberness was every bit as important as regaining his strength.

When their workout concluded, everyone headed back to their respective dorms, showered, and dressed. By the time they were done, it was time for breakfast. A lot of people were already sitting down in the Great Hall, eating. All of the students were chatting away as they sat at their tables. When Harry entered, all conversation ceased.

Harry was keenly aware of the eyes on him as he walked to the Hufflepuff table, where Susan, Daphne, Blaise, Tracey, and Hannah were already sitting. As he walked, whispered conversations began to pick up. They were about him.

"It's Harry Potter."

"Harry Potter."

"I wonder what happened to him?"

"I heard he had a panic attack."

"I heard he was put in the hospital."

"Someone told me that he was going dark."

"Why is he so pale? Do you think he's sick?"

Given how he'd avoided people since returning to Hogwarts, he couldn't blame them for the way they were talking. It was annoying, but it was also understandable. That was why he walked silently to his seat, sat down, and did his best to ignore them.

"You look better now that you've freshened up," Hannah said.

"I feel a little better," Harry admitted.

Hannah smiled. "I'm glad to hear that."

"We're all glad to hear that," Susan added.

Blaize nodded. "You really had us worried."

"I'm sorry," Harry said in a whisper.

"Don't worry about it," Tracey said. "We understand. Now let's dig in! I'm starving!"

"Glutton," Daphne muttered too softly for Tracey to hear.

Everyone started eating breakfast. Given how hard they worked, it wasn't surprising that most of them piled food onto their plates and ate with a ravenousness that belied their size. While they ate, they also conversed, with Tracey being the loudest, Terry, Lisa, and Luna joined up with them.

"The nargles around you have disappeared," Luna announced as if diagnosing that her patient had been cured. "I'm glad to hear that. You had a bad infection of nargles recently."

"Is that so?" Harry asked. "Then I'm glad they're gone."

Luna smiled. "Me too."

As breakfast continued, someone else wandered up to them. It was a girl who looked like a younger version of Daphne, but with a different shade of hair and different colored eyes. Astoria. Daphne's younger sister.

"Harry Potter," Astoria said.

Harry turned in his seat to face Astoria. "Good morning, Astor—guh!"

The Great Hall went silent as Harry fell off his seat after Astoria kicked him in the shin. Harry landed on his back. The air left his lungs in a rush. However, the breathlessness was nothing compared to the stinging pain in his shin.

"Stori!" Daphne bellowed as she stood up. "Why did you do that?!"

Astoria glanced at Daphne, and then looked back at Harry. She frowned at him. "That was for my sister. I bet you don't know it, but my sister cried for you every night this summer. Whenever we spoke, she always looked sad. It's your fault my sister was hurting. If you hurt her again, I'm going to do more than kick you."

This girl was a good sister, Harry decided. Only someone who was truly worried would do something like kick a person for someone else. He couldn't fault Astoria for it either. He'd hurt Daphne, he'd hurt everyone, but Daphne had probably been hit the hardest due to her past experiences. Hurting her was a sin that he'd never be able to erase. All he could do now was try to make amends.

"I understand." Harry smiled at Astoria, who took a step back, a flabbergasted expression appearing on her face. "Thank you. I'll do my best to never make Daphne sad again."

Astoria looked away. "S-so long as you understand that, we're cool."

Breakfast resumed, though not without the current event being the new hottest topic. As Harry sat down and returned to eating, Daphne, who sat next to him, placed a hand on his thigh for a moment, as if thanking him. He noticed her looking at him out of the corner of his eye, and they shared a smile.

"Stori," Luna said seriously as the youngest girl sat down.

"Luna." Astoria greeted.

"Did you know that you have a lot of nargles around your head right now?" Luna asked, and at that, several of their friends began laughing, much to Luna's confusion.

XoX

Classes started soon after lunch. That day, Harry's first class was Arithmancy, which he shared with Daphne, Terry, and Lisa.

Arithmancy is a magical discipline that studies the magical properties of numbers. It's the closest magic that came to science after alchemy and potions. By learning how numbers work magically, a witch or wizard can learn how to increase the potency of specific ritual, create wand movements for new spells based on precise calculations, and even predict the future using numerology.

Of course, Harry didn't believe that anything, arithmancy included, could predict the future. That said, the subject interested him. This was especially the case because arithmancy would help increase his knowledge of every other branch of magic, since spells and potions all used arithmetic principles.

The person teaching them was Septima Vector. She was a fairly young witch—compared to some of the others at least. She held herself with an exuberance that came from youth, and her robes, which were more form fitting than Professor McGonagall's, revealed that she had the figure of a younger woman. Harry pegged her to be in her 30s.

Class consisted mostly of going over basic arithmetic equations consisting of the three most powerful magical numbers: 3, 7, and 13. According to the Rowena's Principle of Arithmetic Divisibility, these three numbers, along with any number that was divisible by one or more of these numbers, held a significant amount of magical power. A good example was the six-pointed star, known by non-magicals as the Star of David. 6 was divisible by 3, and was therefore a good number for creating rituals.

There was a common misconception among the non-magical community that a pentagram was used mostly for rituals. The truth was that pentagrams, five-pointed stars, barely functioned as a proper ritual focus. Rituals using it tended to fail, and some could even backfire. Six-pointed stars were the best to use in a basic ritual.

Of course, the six-pointed star was, in and of itself, a very basic ritual symbol. It was a 6, which meant it was only divisible by 3, and while 3 was a magically powerful number, it couldn't compete with a ritual composed of something with 21 points, which was divisible by 3 and 7. Sadly, a twenty-one-pointed star was impractical to use in a ritual.

After class, Harry walked with the others as they spoke. Terry and Lisa seemed intent on debating the subject of which numbers have more power.

"I believe three, seven, and thirteen are more powerful than any divisible number because their prime numbers," Terry was saying.

"Just because something is a prime number, that doesn't make it more powerful. I think the ability to add more prime numbers into them have a lot more potential. Composite numbers allow you to add powerful prime numbers into them, thus increasing their power in turn," Lisa rebutted.

Harry and Daphne shared a look. Daphne smiled. Harry sent an uncertain one back. He was still worried. Even though Daphne and the others had accepted him back into their fold, he would have been lying if he said he wasn't concerned about potential lingering resentment. It would have been justified. He'd left them. Had someone else done this to him, he would have resented them.

Perhaps, they're just better people than I am.

Harry's second period that day was Transfiguration. Professor McGonagall had given him a funny look when he entered with his friends—not that he blamed her. However, she was professional enough not to call him out. She began their classes the same as always, by jumping right into a lecture about animagus. Unlike the previous lecture last year, which had only briefly touched upon the animagus ability, this one was a lot more in depth. However, Harry had already become an

animagus. He didn't listen to the lecture.

"Is something wrong, Harry?" asked Susan. "You're not paying attention."

Transfiguration that year was shared with the Hufflepuffs. Susan and Hannah sat with him and Neville.

"Nothing's wrong," Harry said. "I'm just a bit distracted."

"Distracted by what?"

Never in his life had Harry heard a more ambiguous question. There was a lot that was distracting him—too much for him to mention within a single sitting. He still needed to come up with an appropriate apology to his friends. Plus he still had to deal with Pettigrew. That was on top of reclaiming his previous standing among his peers and getting back into shape. Harry had so much work that needed to be done, and, for perhaps the first time in his life, he wasn't sure how to go about doing it.

Class ended and the students all stood up. As they were leaving, Professor McGonagall called out to him. "Mr. Potter, I would like to speak with you before you head off to your next class."

"You three go on ahead," Harry said to Susan, Hannah, and Neville. "I won't be long."

His three friends nodded, though Susan did so hesitantly, and left the classroom shortly after.

Harry walked up to Professor McGonagall. He wore the politest expression he could, the better to present a facade that nothing was wrong. "Can I help you, Professor?"

Professor McGonagall studied him with a look that Harry couldn't comprehend. She seemed both worried and suspicious, though he couldn't begin to guess what she might be suspicious of. Then again, considering his previous actions and the way he'd been hiding, maybe she thought his sudden reappearance was suspicious in and of itself.

"It has been a long time since I've seen you in my class," she said at last.

Harry shifted. "Actually, I've always been in your class. You just didn't see me because of this."

Deciding that honesty was the best policy, Harry took out his enchanted necklace, letting it dangle from his grasp as McGonagall inspected it.

"Enchantments?" Her eyes widened. "Did you make this?"

Harry shook his head. "An enchantress in Diagon Alley made it for me."

"I see. Yes, that makes sense. Still, why would you have something like this made?"

"I... didn't want anyone getting near me," Harry admitted. It took more effort to admit than he thought it would have, but he couldn't stop now. He needed to be upfront and honest. "After what happened to... to Hermione, I thought it would be better if I didn't let anyone else get close to me."

Professor McGonagall's face softened. "I think I understand why you would do this, and while I do not agree with what you did, I'll not say anything more on the matter. It appears you've come back to your senses. I can only assume your friends are responsible for this feat."

"Yes, ma'am."

"In that case, I'll not keep you. However, should you ever need someone to talk to, know that my door is always open."

"I will. Thank you, Professor."

Harry left Professor McGonagall's classroom to find Susan waiting for him. She was leaning against the wall, her hands clasped in front of her, the book bag dangling from her grasp. When he closed the door she looked up. Her eyes brightened.

"Susan."

"What did Professor McGonagall want to talk about?" Susan asked as they began walking down the hall.

"She just wanted to ask if everything was okay," Harry said, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. "You waited for me."

Susan blushed. "I... didn't want you to be alone."

"I see."

She was worried that he might have a relapse. Well, he guessed he couldn't blame her. When he considered how he'd been before she and Daphne helped him, it made sense that she'd want to keep an eye on him at all times. It was kind of touching, to be honest.

After second period was lunch. Harry decided that this would be a good time to properly apologize, when everyone was present so he only needed to say it once. Even saying it once was going to be hard. Harry wasn't the type who apologized often, so he'd like to get this done with one apology.

Rather than meet in the Great Hall for lunch, everyone met up in the All House Common Room. According to Susan, that was where they had been meeting since school started. It pleased Harry to know this place had been put to good use. It also made him feel ashamed. His friends had been doing all they could to remain together. Meanwhile, he'd neglected them for his own selfish purposes.

He and the others sat down at one of the rectangular tables. Everyone but Harry was chatting.

"I can't believe it's already been over a month since school started. Halloween is coming up soon," Neville said.

Blaize nodded. "I learned in muggle studies that muggles celebrate Halloween by dressing up as witches and wizards."

Harry twitched at the word "muggle." What happened to mundane?

"I didn't know that," Neville said.

Blaize nodded. "It's apparently been a tradition for a while now, though I don't know why."

"Have you no brains in that head of yours, Boot? The new Firebolt might be the fastest broom in the market, but it's clearly not the best," Tracey said. "Speed doesn't mean anything if it lacks maneuverability. Do you know how hard it must be to turn something going over two-hundred kilometers per minute?"

Terry scoffed. "I know what I'm talking about. You're the one who's lost her mind. The Firebolt has several charms and enchantments that keep the rider from being affected by the speed. This allows them to make turns they couldn't have done otherwise."

"But there's no charm that can affect gravity," Tracey rebutted. "If the rider doesn't want to be squashed or thrown off, then they need to decelerate. That means the Firebolt's entire design is inherently flawed."

Harry was impressed by how smart Tracey sounded. Then again, the only time she sounded smart was when she talked about Quidditch or brooms.

"Must you two constantly argue about brooms?" Lisa asked.

"Yes!" Terry and Tracey said.

"What's a nargle?" Astoria asked Luna, who was eating some type of food that Harry had never seen. It looked like she'd just mixed a bunch of different foods together to create a sandwich.

"Nargles are mischievous creatures. They like to hide in mistletoe, and they can infect people by hovering around them."

"What do they look like?"

"No one knows, since nargles are invisible unless they want to be seen." Luna shrugged. "But I've heard they look like fairies when they choose to reveal themselves to humans."

While Luna and Astoria's conversation was odd indeed, the one between Susan, Hannah, and Daphne, seemed relatively normal.

"I was thinking about getting some of those blood pops when we go into

Hogsmeade," Hannah said.

Daphne made a face. "Aren't those for vampires?"

"Well, yes, but I wanted to see if they really tasted like blood."

Susan also made a face. "How do you even know what blood tastes like?"

"Remember when we went to my father's vineyards in California and I smashed my mouth against a wheel barrel?"

Susan winced. "Yeah, your teeth were bleeding a lot... oh."

"Right."

The longer everyone spoke, the less certain Harry became. He felt so out of place. It was like he no longer belonged with everyone. Could they even accept him anymore, after what he'd done? Why should they? He'd practically betrayed their feelings at a time when they needed him the most.

"Harry?" Daphne said, suddenly noticing his silence. "Is everything okay?"

Everyone stopped talking and turned to him. Harry suddenly felt like he was being shoved into a spotlight. At any other time, during any other instance, he might have revelled in that spotlight and used it to further his agenda. Now? Now he just wanted to hide.

But I can't hide, can I? I need to... I need to come clean and apologize to everyone.

That was right. These people were friends. They were precious, cherished friends, and they had supported him even after he'd abandoned them. He might not belong with them anymore, but since they hadn't tossed him aside, the least he could do was return their kindness with his own.

Harry stood up and bowed to everyone there. "I'm sorry," he blurted.

Everyone stared at him like he was an idiot. Harry blushed. "I... I neglected all of you. While everyone was hurting, I ran away from my pain and wasn't there for any of you. I secluded myself and ignored you, my friends, in some misguided attempt to protect my own feelings. I—"

"Man, can you go on or what?" Tracey interrupted.

"E-excuse me?" Harry said, blinking.

"Look, I'm not the smartest person in the world," Tracey said.

"That's something we can agree on," Terry agreed.

"Shut up, Boot!" Tracey snapped before looking back at Harry. "Still, don't you think you're giving us too little credit? If we really hated you, or didn't want you with us, we wouldn't have spent so much time getting you back."

Lisa nodded. "We've already forgiven you."

"We pretty much knew why you were doing it," Blaize added with a shrug. "We don't blame you."

"We were all going through a tough time, but I think you had it the worst," Neville added.

Harry smiled unsurely. "Thanks."

It wasn't that he wasn't grateful. He was very grateful. Their acceptance meant a lot to him, but he felt so guilty. They might have forgiven him, but Harry couldn't forgive himself.

As the conversations picked up where they left off, Harry began to feel out of place again. Should he try and join in? Who should he talk to? Would they want to talk to him, or would they be resentful that he was butting in on their conversation? He didn't know what to do. Never in his life had he been more frustrated.

A hand landed on his knee. It was small and soft. He recognized it just from the feel, but he would've known who it belonged to even if he

couldn't remember everything. Only one person was sitting close enough to do this.

He glanced at Daphne, who was still chatting with Hannah and Susan. She wasn't looking at him, but he could feel her hand squeeze his thigh, as if reassuring him. Harry didn't know what to do. However, he knew what he wanted to do.

Grabbing Daphne's hand, he turned to Blaize and Neville, and began sharing his experiences with muggle Halloween.

XoX

Harry had been dreading many things when he returned to daily school life. Potions was one of those things.

He didn't fear Snape. Disliked the man intensely, perhaps, but not fear. Snape was the man who, on his first day of school, tried to make Harry look like an idiot by asking questions that were not in the first year curriculum. He'd then deducted points from Harry, claiming that he was a cheater. That said, since last year, the man had done his best to ignore Harry, and Harry, likewise, had done everything he could to ignore the mopy potions professor in turn.

Sadly, such was not the case this time.

Like last year, potions was shared with the Slytherins. Harry and Neville sat with Blaize, Daphne, and Tracey. While he received a few looks from everyone else, no one came up to them. Daphne sat on his right, and Tracey on his left. Blaize and Neville sat at the table in front of them.

"Hey, Harry. You said that you've been attending all of our classes, right?" Tracey asked.

"Yes. That's right."

"Then how come no one ever saw you?"

Harry sighed at having to explain it again, but since Tracey hadn't been there when he'd spoken to Professor McGonagall, he knew she couldn't

help it. He pulled out his necklace and showed it to her and Daphne. After explaining how it worked, Tracey whistled.

"That's pretty neat. I didn't know enchanted items could do that."

Before Harry could say anything, the doors slammed open and Snape stalked into the room. His cloak billowed behind him as he gave everyone who wasn't a Slytherin a nasty stare. When he got to Harry's table, he paused. Then he frowned. Then his lips twitched. Harry did not like that twitch.

"Mr. Potter," he purred as he stared down at Harry. His long, hook-like nose almost curled. "How nice of you to finally grace us with your presence. I had thought for sure that you'd been expelled for incompetence and truancy."

Harry could have done many things; he could have snapped at Snape, could have responded with sarcasm, could have returned fire with fire. Numerous visions flashed through his head. He thought of all the things he wanted to say, wanted to do. However, he did none of those things. They wouldn't have helped him here anyway.

He bowed his head. "I apologize, Professor Snape. I promise not to be absent from your class again."

Snape remained silent, his frown deepening as if he was having trouble deciding how to respond. He didn't respond well to receiving such sincere respect—not from Harry.

Finally, after nearly a full minute, his upper lip curled, and he said, "I hope you haven't forgotten everything you've learned. You're going to have a hard time catching up as it is." Then he stalked up to the front of the classroom and began snapping out orders to "follow the instructions on the board, you dunderheads."

Harry sighed. That had gone a bit better than he had expected.

XoX

Early the next morning, while he and everyone else were exercising,

Harry tried to decide on how he should broach the topic of Peter Pettigrew. He didn't want to just spring it on them. This was pretty big news. It wasn't every day that people discovered that Sirius Black was not only innocent, but that Peter Pettigrew, the one he was supposed to have murdered, was not only alive, but also responsible for his parents' deaths. This was a serious topic...

Damn it. I'm making Sirius puns in my own mind now.

Harry sighed as he continued doing situps. This entire thing was problematic. He decided to think about something that was easier to bring up.

Another thing that Harry wanted to do was take everyone down to the Chamber of Secrets. While he did not plan on telling anyone outside of Daphne and Susan about his eidetic memory, he did want to share everything else. He was sick of keeping so many secrets.

"So, there's something I wanted to tell all of you," Harry said after they had all sat down for breakfast.

Everyone stopped talking and looked at him.

"Now?" Tracey asked.

Harry shook his head. "Not now. Later tonight. After dinner."

Even though he'd said later tonight, the truth was that Harry was tempted to tell them everything right then and there. He didn't want to wait.

It was strange. Harry had always considered himself to be a patient person. He understood that in order to receive the best conceivable outcome, waiting was a necessity, as was the case here. However, as classes continued, he found himself consciously waiting for the day to end. Even when dinner finally did arrive, Harry could barely stand to eat.

"You should eat something," Susan said, putting some pork onto his plate. She then leaned in and whispered. "You're going to tell everyone about your perfect memory, right?"

Harry shook his head and whispered back, "I'd rather keep that a secret for now. I have some other secrets that I wanted to share with you all. They're rather important, and I'd... I don't want to leave you guys in the dark about them."

Susan frowned at him, but nodded, and then proceeded to shovel more food onto his plate. Harry ate, but mostly because he didn't want Susan to be disappointed in him. He didn't really feel like eating. His stomach was doing weird flip flops, and his palms felt sweaty. Harry wondered if he was getting sick, which was impossible, of course. He'd never been sick a day in his life. Still, he wasn't feeling well, and that terrible feeling only increased the longer dinner went on. By the time it was finished, Harry felt ready to throw up.

When they were finished, everyone made their way out of the Great Hall.

"So," Blaize started, "What is it you wanted to tell us?"

"No here," Harry said, gesturing. "Follow me."

He lead everyone up a flight of stairs, through a series of corridors with bowing suits of armor, and into a room that looked like one of the many unused classrooms. Aged and covered in a layer of dust, the only thing present within this room were a series of footprints. They were Harry's footprints.

"What are we doing in this place?" asked Tracey, covering her nose and coughing as she stepped on the ground and kicked up dust.

"There's a secret passage in here," Harry said. He walked up to the wall, where the footprints ended.

"A secret passage?" inquired Lisa.

"Yes." Harry closed his eyes and hissed out the word that would open the passage. "*Open!*"

Everyone jumped when they heard him speak parseltongue. They already knew that he could, but they must have forgotten about it until now. However, whether they were surprised or not, they didn't get a

chance to comment. The next instant, the wall slowly peeled back one brick at a time, revealing a hidden passage located within.

Harry held up his hand and clenched it into a fist, and, like a spark igniting, his hand began to glow. He turned around to everyone. They looked shocked, but he paid them no heed.

"Follow me, please, and watch your step. This passage has a steep descent."

The passage was winding as it traveled down, down, down, leading deeper into the depths of Hogwarts, past the basement where the Slytherin dorms were and far below the Black Lake. Harry's friends followed closely behind them. He drew upon more of his magic, creating a bright light to help them see.

"How far down is this tunnel?" Tracey complained.

"We've already traveled pretty deep. I bet we're traveling down into its very depths," Terry said.

"This passage isn't on the Marauders Map—eep!" Lisa said, only to squeak at the end.

"So you guys did have the Marauders Map," Harry said. "I had been wondering how you could track me so well. Let me guess, it's in the Weasley twins' possession."

"How do you know about the Marauders Map?" asked Neville.

"Because my father was one of the Marauders," Harry answered. "He, along with Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew, and Remus Lupin, were the four who created the Marauders' map together."

"W-wait? You're telling me that Remus Lupin is a Marauder?!" Tracey squawked. "No way!"

"Yes way," Harry said.

"I'm more concerned to hear that Sirius Black was a Marauder," Hanna

admitted.

"There's nothing to be concerned about," Harry said. "Sirius Black is one of the things I want to talk about."

No one said anything after that. They reached the end of the passage, where a rickety old door sat on rusted hinges. Harry opened the door and stepped aside. Everyone took the hint and went through.

"What the bloody hell is this?!" Tracey screamed in shock.

Harry walked into the Chamber of Secrets and stepped past his friends. He turned around. Shock was etched onto the faces of everyone, though Tracey's gaping jaw was by far the silliest expression present. They looked like someone had punched them in the gut with iron knuckles.

"This is the Chamber of Secrets," Harry said to them. "I've been... living here since school started."

That admittance, that he'd been hiding in this place, was the hardest he'd made so far. It shamed him to admit that he'd run from his problem to the point that he had literally secluded himself in a place like this. If he'd been stronger, he wouldn't have done this. If he'd reached out to his friends, perhaps he wouldn't have run. All he could do now was come clean.

"The Chamber of Secrets," Blaize whispered. "So, it really does exist..."

"How did you find this place?" asked Daphne.

"Do you remember the story about how someone died in the second floor bathroom?" Daphne nodded. "That person was Myrtle. She was killed there during the first time when the Chamber of Secrets had been opened. I learned about that by chance, and when Hermione died, I went to the second floor bathroom and found out how Myrtle died."

Harry paused and closed his eyes. Talking about Hermione stung. There was a pain in his chest, like an open wound that grew wider the more he thought about her. No one else said anything, allow him to regain his bearings.

"Anyway, through her, I discovered a secret passage in the girl's bathroom that lead to here. There are actually several passages leading to the Chamber of Secrets. I've discovered four so far."

Harry frowned when he noticed that no one was actually paying attention to him anymore. Their eyes were on something behind him. The basilisk. It wasn't like he could blame them for staring. The basilisk was huge, a massive creature that spanned upwards of 15 meters, with scales covering its body and eyes like amber gemstones. It was easy to see why they'd be unable to look away.

"Harry..." Tracey said, a tremor in her voice. "What the bloody hell am I looking at?"

"That is a basilisk."

There were several sharp inhales of breath. While Tracey didn't know what a basilisk was, Blaize, Daphne, Terry, and Lisa did. They turned their eyes from the massive snake to him.

"And... what is it doing here?" Lisa hesitated to ask, almost as if she was afraid of the answer.

"I killed it."

There was a moment of silence as the group tried to take this in. Harry could see in their facial expressions how they tried and failed to comprehend that single sentence. Their faces were twisted, the struggle clear as day. They were trying to believe him but couldn't.

"How... did you kill it?" Daphne asked.

In response to her words, Harry waved his hand and summoned Gryffindor's sword from where it sat against his desk, which he showed to the others. "I killed it with this."

"A sword?" Tracey said. "You killed it with a sword?"

"Yes."

"That thing? That massive, bloody snake. You killed it with a sword?"

"I believe I just said that."

"I give up," Tracey said. "I'm done. I no longer know what to think. I'm just gonna go to bed after this, wake up, and hopefully find out that all of this was just a dream."

"Good luck with that," Terry snarked.

"Can it, Boot!"

"What I want to know is: What was this thing doing here?" Lisa asked.

"Do you remember the story about the Chamber of Secrets?" Harry asked.

Lisa nodded. "Before Salazar Slytherin was kicked out of Hogwarts, he built a chamber that none of the other founders knew about. Then he put a monster in there. Legends had it that the monster was waiting for the heir of Slytherin to appear so it could continue Salazar's work of killing off muggle borns. Are you telling me the basilisk was that monster?"

Harry nodded. "A basilisk's gaze is deadly. However, if you stare into a basilisk's eyes through a reflection, it will only petrify you. That is why all those people were petrified, because none of them except Nicholas looked at it directly, and Nick was already dead so it couldn't kill him."

"What about... Hermione?" Neville asked. Astoria and Luna seemed to stop paying attention and walked past Harry.

"Hermione wasn't killed by the basilisk," Harry said through clenched teeth. "She was murdered by the man who was controlling it."

Harry tried not to let his anger get the better of him, but it was hard. Tom Riddle had killed Hermione to get to him. Had he not been so adamant on not doing anything that he deemed as "unbeneficial" for himself, then she wouldn't have died. He didn't know who he hated more: Tom or himself?

No one seemed to know what to say, so Harry decided to drop the subject. He didn't want to talk about that anyway.

"There are a lot of nargles around this poor creature," Luna said. She and Astoria were near it's head, gazing into its soulless eyes.

"Poor creature?" Astoria questioned Luna with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes." Luna nodded. "This poor creature was used for evil purposes. It was never given a chance to become something other than what it's masters wanted it to be. It's so sad."

Astoria seemed unable think of something smart to say, so she shrugged her shoulders and said, "If you say so."

"There's something else that I need to tell you," Harry continued. "And this is important, especially because I'm going to need your help, Susan."

For a moment, Harry felt guilt spring from his gut like uncoiling serpents. Just the other day, she and the others had been forced to run him ragged and confront him, to bridge the gap that he had made with them. Now he was springing this on her. He truly was a lousy friend.

But Susan just smiled, her eyes glimmering with a determined glint as she said, "How can I help?"

Harry took a deep breath...

... and then he dropped a bomb.

"Sirius Black is innocent of all of his crimes, and I need your help to prove it."

XoX

Harry told his friends everything that happened during his summer, from his experiments to his meeting with Sirius Black. He did leave out how he obliviated his relatives. That was a crime, and he didn't want them being implicated by association if something happened to him. That said, outside of his use of illegal magic, he held nothing back.

After his explanation, he asked Susan to write a letter to her aunt, asking Madam Amelia Bones to come back to Hogwarts. He also asked that she be discreet about it. Harry didn't want anyone else to catch wind of this. She told him that she would write one up this weekend, which would be the only time that her aunt was available. Thankfully, the weekend was only a day away.

The previous day, Harry had moved his luggage back into the Gryffindor common room. His roommates had been shocked to discover him that morning. Seamus and Dean had asked all kinds of questions; what had he been doing, where had he gone, was he back for good, were the rumors about him quitting Gryffindor true.

Harry had no idea where that last rumor had come from, but it must have started from somewhere. He had answered all of their questions, though he didn't tell them the full truth. His friends deserved an answer, but he didn't want knowledge of his misdeeds spreading. Perhaps that was wrong of him. However, he still wanted people outside of his circle to see him as perfect—even if that facade had been ruined.

Gryffindors had four classes on Friday: Potions, Charms, Study of Ancient Runes, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. Potions and Charms were easy enough. Snape had tried to cause some problems by making snide remarks about him, but Harry had replied to every single one with a smile and a polite acknowledgement. Not even Snape could give him detention for that.

Charms was also relatively easy to deal with. Professor Flitwick had been surprised to see him, but when Harry raised his hand to answer a question, the stout man had replied with a smile and welcomed him back.

The only real trouble of the day was Defense Against the Dark Arts.

XoX

Harry filed into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom with everyone else, taking up a position with Neville, Daphne, Blaise, and Tracey near the front. Seconds after the students entered, Professor Lupin walked into the room. To the man's credit, while he acted surprised by Harry's presence, he displayed enough professionalism not to react

outside of showcasing a moment's hesitation.

Class began as usual. They had already mastered the *Ridikulus* charm and were moving onto the next spell—the seize and pull charm.

"*Carpe Retractum*," Remus began, "is a charm that creates a retractable rope made of light. This spell is used to pull certain objects toward the caster, or to pull the caster toward whatever object the rope is affixed to. You're generally supposed to use this on inanimate objects, though it can be used on plants and animals."

Harry was already well-versed in this spell, though he rarely used it. The spell was easy enough to cast. However, it took a fair amount of force to pull objects toward you, nevermind pulling yourself toward an object. Stronger individuals had an easier time, since the act of pulling was a physical one and not magical. That said, it worked on small objects easily enough.

After explaining the mechanics behind the technique, Professor Lupin had everyone line up on one side, and then he set several on tables with pots on the other side.

"All right!" He clapped his hands. "I want all of you to practice this charm. Remember, to cast this spell, you need to make a whipping motion with your wand and say '*carpe retractum*.' Go ahead and try."

Harry spent a moment observing everyone else as they practiced. Perhaps it was expected, but Daphne, Blaise, and Tracey were the ones who had the best results on the first try. Neville wasn't far behind them. Everyone else had varying degrees of success, with some managing to produce a whip and others not getting more than a sputter of light. After studying everyone for a second longer, he decided to at least practice the spell a little.

He whipped his wand forward, a beam of light ejecting from the end, latching onto the pot that sat on the table in front of him. He braced himself. Then he yanked it back, toward him. The pot flew off the desk, and he caught it with his right hand.

"Excellent!" Professor Lupin clapped. "Well done, Mr. Potter! You did it on

your first try and non-verbally. Take fifteen points for Gryffindor."

Opening his mouth, Harry quickly snapped it closed when he realized that, indeed, he'd cast the spell non-verbally. He hadn't meant to do that.

"Thank you, Professor," Harry replied softly.

Professor Lupin smiled one last time, and then turned around. He looked like he was going to help Seamus, who'd lit his pot on fire, but before anything else could happen, Professor McGonagall rushed into the room and hurried over to Professor Lupin's side. Harry was too late to catch the beginning of their conversation. However, he enhanced his ears quickly enough to hear the end of it.

"Sirius Black is inside of Hogwarts!"

Harry froze. Sirius was here? At Hogwarts?

T-that lame brained fool! What the blazes is he doing here?!

Professor Lupin addressed the students. "I apologize everyone, but it looks like class is over for right now. There's been a call for all the faculty. I have been asked to escort you all to the Great Hall. If you'd follow me, please."

Harry felt his blood pumping abnormally through his veins as he followed Professor Lupin down the corridor with everyone else. What should he do? Should he tell the professor about Sirius? No, that was a bad idea. The professor might have been Sirius's friend at one point, but now he thought the man a traitor. Without providing ample evidence to suggest that Sirius was innocent, letting anyone know would only lead to him being confined.

Dang it! What should I do now? I have to find Sirius, but there's no way I can do that in this massive castle! I don't even know where he might be hiding! This is impossible. It's—

A hand engulfed his. Harry was jerked out of his worries, and he looked up, into the ice blue eyes of Daphne.

"Do you know what's going on?" she asked.

Harry casually glanced at everyone around them, making sure no one could overhear, and then he leaned into her ear. "Sirius Black is currently inside Hogwarts. He most likely became impatient and decided to go after Pettigrew on his own. I'm not sure how, but someone spotted him. My guess is the faculty is going to bring all the students to the Great Hall, and then have several people look for him while the rest guard us."

"That... doesn't sound good," Daphne admitted.

His smile turned mirthless. "No, it doesn't sound good at all."

By the time their class reached the Great Hall, the large room was already filled with a lot of students. The tables had been removed. Now there was just a large, empty space, where students were congregating into groups. As his class wandered into the room, traveling deeper in, he picked up the numerous conversations from various people. It seemed as if no one knew what they'd been called there for.

It took Harry several minutes to locate their friends. Hannah and Susan weren't there, but Lisa and Terry were. Daphne also managed to find Astoria. She didn't let go of the girl's hand once they'd met up.

"Do you have any idea as to what's going on?" asked Terry.

"I'm sure Dumbledore will make the announcement soon," Harry said, leaning in. "However, I heard Professor McGonagall saying that Sirius Black has infiltrated Hogwarts."

Terry looked like he'd been struck in the face. "Seriously? But isn't he—"

"Yes, he is. That fool probably got impatient and came here to find Pettigrew on his own." Harry ran a hand through his messy hair. "Honestly, that man is such a pain."

"What are we going to do?" asked Lisa.

"There isn't much we can do right now," Harry said. "I'll have a more clear picture once everything has settled down."

More people arrived, including faculty members. It wasn't long before Professor Dumbledore himself strolled in through the Great Hall's doors. The students went silent as he made his way to the podium, turned around, and began speaking.

"Students of Hogwarts," he boomed, his voice reverberating across the Great Hall. "We have run into a dire situation. Sirius Black has somehow managed to infiltrate Hogwarts." The students began to shout. Voices rose. They were quickly squashed, however, when Professor Dumbledore raised his wand and it released a loud *bang!* and a flash of light. "I understand that you are all nervous. However, allow me to assure you that your safety is our top priority. That is why, for tonight, you shall all remain here. The staff will be guarding you and patrolling the castle in search of Sirius Black. I urge you not to leave the room. The dementors have been given special permission to roam the halls, and they cannot tell friend from foe."

With those ominous words, Dumbledore gathered the staff and began speaking with them in hushed tones. They were too far for Harry to hear. His ears may have been enhanced, but not even he could pick out singular noises above the din of conversation. Instead, he turned his thoughts inward.

He needed to somehow warn Sirius about what was happening. He also needed to scold that idiot for being stupid. Honestly, how hard was it to stay put?

But how should I find him?

"I see Susan and Hannah," Daphne said, pointing to a pair of people in the distance. They were surrounded by their friends in Hufflepuff. He and the others walked up to them.

"Harry!" Susan said when she spotted him. Squeezing out of the crowd, she rushed up to him and grabbed his hand. "Harry, what should we do?"

Harry took a deep breath. "There's nothing we can do right now. I'll have to wait until nightfall, and then sneak out of the Great Hall using my invisibility cloak, find Sirius, and get his butt out of here before he gets himself kissed."

"You're going out alone?" Susan asked, aghast. The others were looking at him like he was an idiot.

"There isn't much choice," Harry admitted. "I can't take anymore people with me if I want to move swiftly. I'll be racing against the clock."

Susan looked like she was going to argue. Daphne did too. However, Harry cut them off.

"Besides, I'm gonna need you to do something else for me. Susan, talk to the staff and see if you can get in contact with your aunt. You need to let her know that there's new information regarding Sirius Black, and that she needs to come here with full squad of aurors, particularly ones who know how to cast the patronus charm."

Harry lamented that he didn't know the patronus charm, but he didn't know anyone who could teach it to him.

"If you can get her here before night hits, then we might be able to solve this without me needing to leave," Harry added.

Susan nodded. "I'll try to hail down the staff."

Susan went off, and Hannah followed her. Harry turned to Astoria and knelt down. "I'm sorry to ask you this, but could you find the Weasley twins for me?"

"What makes you think I know where they are?" asked Astoria.

"Because you're about as mischievous as they are," Harry said. "I imagine if anyone can find them, it's you."

Astoria stared at him harder than he'd ever seen from her. For a moment, Harry wondered where the wide-eyed girl he first met had gone, but then he realized it must have been a facade. This girl was a lot more cunning than he thought she had been. Actually, she reminded him of the Weasley twins.

"All right," she said at last. "However, I have a condition."

Harry frowned, but he knew better than to deny her. "Which is?"

"Make my sister happy."

Harry blinked.

"Stori!" Daphne nearly shouted, only just managing to keep her reaction down to a yelled hiss. Her face was red all the way down to her neck.

"My sister has been protecting me for as long as I've known her, but that means she doesn't have anyone protecting her. I love my sister. I want her to be happy. You're going to protect her from our father and make her happy."

"You don't have to do this Harry," Daphne said.

"I can't accept that offer," Harry admitted. Astoria frowned, and Daphne, despite her previous words, looked hurt. "I already promised myself at the New Year Galla during our first year that I would protect Daphne and her happiness. It wouldn't be a fair deal."

While Daphne's face looked ready to explode, Astoria actually smiled.

"You know what, I take back what I said about you behind your back. If you're going to go that far for Daphne, then you're all right in my book."

Harry would have smiled, but there was business to be had. "What's your price for finding the Weasley Twins?"

Astoria closed her eyes. "A favor."

"Just a favor?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Don't take favors lightly. I'll keep one favor from you, and when I cash it, you'll have no choice but to do whatever that favor is no matter how dangerous or humiliating it might be."

Harry would have liked to say that he'd thought about his answer carefully, that he weighed the pros against the cons. He would've liked to say that he tried peering into the future, to see what sort of favor Astoria

might call in, that he'd made an intelligent choice. However, in truth, Harry barely thought about the deal before shaking Astoria's outstretched hand.

"Deal."

Astoria, it turned out, was able to sniff out the Weasley Twins even more easily than Harry imagined. She found them within minutes.

"Harrykins!" Fred exclaimed.

"We heard you were back," George said.

"But we didn't know if we believed it," Fred continued.

"Good to see you, old chap!"

"Fred, George. I need your help."

"Oh?" Fred raised an eyebrow. "What can we help you with?"

"The Marauders Map. I need to borrow it."

Fred and George looked at each other.

"I'm guessing your friends told you about the map?" George said.

Harry shook his head. "I've been looking for the map since this year. I thought you might have it, but I didn't know for sure until my friends chased me down. Anyway, that map was created by my father and his friends."

"Your father?!" Fred gaped. "Your father is..."

"Prongs," Harry said. "It was named after his animagus form, which is a stag."

"You're the son of Prongs..."

Fred and George deliberated some more, but they eventually pulled out the map and gave it to Harry.

"Since you're the son of Prongs, we can't in good conscience keep this from you," Fred said as he placed the map in Harry's hand.

"Use it wisely," George added.

"Thank you," Harry said as he knelt on the ground, pulled out his wand, and tapped it against the map. "I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good."

Harry watched as words appeared on the parchment:

"Messrs Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs

Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers

are proud to present

THE MARAUDER'S MAP"

Unfolding the parchment, Harry studied the map; almost everyone was in the Great Hall. In fact, there were only two people not in the Great Hall right now. Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew. They were outside, on the campus grounds, and they were getting further away.

Harry could've sworn, but he didn't. He memorized the route that they were taking, and then he shoved the map into Daphne's hands.

"Daph, could you please go find Remus Lupin. Tell him that you have new information about Wormtail and Padfoot, and then show him this map. He'll know what to do."

"What are you going to do?" asked Daphne as she held the map close.

"Sirius Black is chasing Pettigrew. I'm going after them."

He didn't give anyone time to respond. Casting a disillusionment charm over himself to become invisible, Harry made his way to the back of the Great Hall. There was a door behind the teacher's table. Through the door was a secret passage that lead to the Chamber of Secrets. Harry rushed through the passage, then changed directions and went through another passage that took him outside. Once he reached the campus

grounds, he didn't hesitate to transform.

A change came over Harry. His bones snapped and shifted. His body sprouted fur as it became longer and more streamlined. Hands and feet turned into paws. Legs became stronger, more powerful, and his senses all sharpened to well past those of human senses.

Harry, now in his jaguar form, bolted across the grassy field. He knew exactly where he was in relation to Sirius and Pettigrew. He moved quickly in the direction that he remembered them traveling.

Coldness seeped into his bones, an unnatural chill born being close to the dementors, those horrid monsters that brought unwanted visions to his mind. Oddly enough, their presence didn't seem as strong right now. They felt muted. Harry wondered if this was the result of his animagus form, but he put that out of his mind and focused on running.

He raced past the Black Lake and reached the entrance to the Whomping Willow. Dementors were swarming around everywhere. They flew above his head, moving past him and continuing on to Hogwarts. Harry felt their coldness seeping into his fur, though the feeling was muted.

"He's here! Take Harry and run!"

"Fool! Avada Kedavra!"

The visions, however, were still present. Harry fought against the nightmarish images that entered his mind. He saw a flash of green and his mother falling to the floor. He pushed it back. He found himself inside of a small cupboard, broken and bloody after being beaten by Vernon. He pushed it back. He saw and saw and saw and pushed and pushed. Ignoring the visions only seemed to make it worse.

Fortunately, the dementors didn't seem capable of recognizing him as a human. They ignored him, and Harry reached the Whomping Willow in record time.

The Whomping Willow was a massive tree that sat at the edge of Hogwarts grounds. Its thick limbs were like tree trunks, and they flailed

as Harry came near, as if each one had a mind of its own. Harry growled like a beast as he leapt through the hailstorm of flailing limbs. He wove across the grounds. Tree branches struck the earth, cracking it, denting it. However, thanks to his animagus form, Harry avoided them all and reached the roots in record time.

There was a secret passage located within the roots of the Whomping Willow. Harry didn't hesitate to leap down, into the tunnel, which would lead to the Shrieking Shack.

Thanks to his animal form, he landed on his feet. He raced down the hallway, a narrow passage that ended in a broken down door, which he burst through like a bat out of hell.

Sirius and Pettigrew were already inside. Sirius was snarling like a rabid beast while Pettigrew quaked in fear in the corner. Harry could already see what was happening. His godfather was losing it, and if something wasn't done soon, then Pettigrew's death was going to be on their hands. Much as Harry hated the rat, he didn't want Sirius to kill him.

"What are you doing Sirius?! I told you not to come to Hogwarts!"

Sirius didn't take his eyes off Pettigrew as he spoke. "I'm sorry, Harry, but I can't do this. I can't sit by knowing that this man is alive and near you, and I can't wait any longer. I have to do this now."

"What? You have to kill him?"

"Yes!"

"Don't be a fool, Sirius!" Harry snapped. "If you kill him now, then all of the effort I've put into clearing your name will be wasted! Don't you want to be a free man?"

"I think I want revenge more than I want freedom."

While all this was going on, Peter Pettigrew was looking at Harry with a cunning expression of hope. It made him sick to his stomach to help this man. Still, sometimes people needed to do things they didn't like to get the results they wanted.

"My friends are in the process of letting Professor Lupin know what's happening, Sirius. He'll get the aurors and then come here. Just sit tight and don't let Pettigrew go anywhere."

"Harry," Pettigrew said, taking a step forward. He stopped when Harry pointed a glowing red hand at him.

"Do not come near me. I'm only letting you live for one reason, and that is to make sure Sirius can be free."

Sirius's face scrunched up as he debated with himself, his thoughts so visible it was almost painful to watch. Finally, after what felt like a lifetime, he scowled and glared at Pettigrew. "Consider yourself lucky that being able to live with my godson is more important than getting revenge, rat."

Harry didn't think it would take Professor Lupin long to gather several people to come and help. But when a chill seeped into his bones, he realized that he'd neglected to take something into account. The dementors. Now that he, Sirius, and Pettigrew were not in their animagus forms, the dementors could sense their presence—and they were coming.

"W-what is this feeling?" Pettigrew asked, shaking.

"Shut up!" Sirius snapped as warily tried eye both his surroundings and Pettigrew. Meanwhile, Harry was dealing with bigger problems.

"HARRY!"

A female voice screamed. Harry covered his hand with his mouth, vomit seeping between his fingers as he fell to his hands and knees. He was cold, so cold. He thought he heard someone yelling his name, but he couldn't tell. Everything was blurring out.

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off!"

"Fool, you think you can defeat me without your wand? Avada Kadavera!"

The voices were stronger now. Image flashed in front of him. Everything was spinning. He felt cold and dark and alone and frightened and he just

wanted everything to stop spinning. Why wouldn't everything stop?!

"You're just a good for nothing freak!"

His uncle's voice screamed in his ear. His body felt heavy. He felt like he was falling down a deep shaft, a hole in which light couldn't reach. Even when his head cracked against something hard and unyielding, he barely felt it. Everything was cold. He felt numb.

"Damn freak!"

"You're lucky that we've decided to accept you into our house! Be grateful!"

"Not Harry, please... have mercy... have mercy..."

"We would've been better off without you!"

"How useless can brat be?!"

"How could you fail me like that?"

"Worthless!"

"Foul!"

"Loathsome!"

"You would've been better off dying with your parents!"

"Why couldn't you protect me?"

The last thing Harry saw was a bony hand reaching out to grab him and several beams of light, followed by a brilliant and ethereal phoenix.

Then the world went dark.

This chapter is a little rushed. I thought about extending it, but there's a lot of things that need to happen in this story, and I didn't want to add unnecessary words when there's still so much plot that

needs to be covered. While it's not my best written chapter, I do hope you all enjoyed it.

Good news! I've decided to finish book 3, so I'll be working exclusively on this until it's done. I'm doing this because I'd like to finish at least one of my fanfics. Afterward, it'll be awhile before I get to book 4, because I'm gonna work on another fan fic and hopefully finish it as well. That's my plan, at least. =

Thanks for reading.

Politics at Play

Chapter 11

Politics at Play

Harry woke up with a sharp intake of breath. His eyes snapped wide open as he shot up into a sitting position. Shortly after, a wave of nausea hit him and he fell back down. Everything blurred in and out of focus, but he blinked several times, forcing his vision to slowly clear.

He was in the hospital wing, though he could have figured out that much simply from the feel of the bed. The ceiling overhead was quite familiar. He frowned, then looked left, and then right. The beds were empty, which he'd expected, but still...

What happened to Sirius?

Sirius had been with him when the dementors had attacked. If Harry had been discovered and been taken to the hospital, then surely Sirius had been found as well.

I guess Sirius wouldn't be in the hospital wing, since he's a wanted criminal. They didn't have him kissed, did they?

If Professor Lupin and the others had arrived in time to save him, then Sirius must have been saved as well. Professor Lupin didn't seem like the type who would let someone be kissed after they were already taken into custody. He hoped that meant Sirius was located in a hospital outside of Hogwarts—or at the very least, getting treated.

There's also Pettigrew...

Harry didn't care if Pettigrew lived or died. That said, he knew that Pettigrew needed to live if Sirius was to be acquitted. In that regard, at least, he hoped the rat hadn't been offed yet.

Madam Pomfrey wasn't in the hospital, which lead Harry to assume that she was speaking with Professor Dumbledore. He wondered how long it would be before they came in.

As if his words were prophetic, the door opened. Professor Dumbledore walked into the room alongside Madam Pomfrey and Madam Bones. Harry rose to greet them.

"Ah, Mr. Potter," Professor Dumbledore greeted. "I am glad to see you're awake. You gave us all quite the scare."

"I apologize, Professor," Harry said softly, even as he turned to Madam Bones, who eyed him with a stern frown of disapproval. "Madam Bones, I'm sorry to have called you here. I have... information on Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew."

"I figured as much," Madam Bones admitted, her frown becoming even more prominent. "Tell me, how did you manage to break out of the veritaserum's effect?"

Harry shook his head. "I didn't. It's impossible to fight against the effects of veritaserum."

"Then how did you—"

"If I may, Madam Bones," Professor Dumbledore interrupted. "I do not believe Harry has the ability to fight off veritaserum. That would indeed make him quite powerful, but no one can do that. Rather, I think what Mr. Potter did was simply remove any memories pertaining to Sirius Black from his mind."

"Remove—" Madam Bones' eyes went wide, but then they narrowed. "—You mean he has a pensieve."

"That would be my guess," Professor Dumbledore admitted.

"The headmaster is correct." Harry nodded in acknowledgement. "I do have a pensieve. I knew that I would be questioned upon my return, so I bought a penseive to store my memories in before coming here."

Were the situation not so serious, the expression on Madam Bones' face would have been amusing. Given that the situation was dire indeed, Harry found no humor in it.

"May I ask why you decided to hide evidence from the aurors like that?" Madam Bones asked.

"Because the aurors method of questioning leaves no room for expanded information," Harry supplied. When he noticed the looks he was getting, he elaborated. "Aurors are only allowed to answer a specific set of questions when interrogating someone who is underage with viretaserum, thanks to the laws of humane conduct that were imposed during the early seventeen-hundreds. What's more, when under the effects of viretaserum, people cannot expand upon their answers, which limits the amount of information they can give. For example, if you had asked: Did you meet Sirius Black?"

"You would have only acknowledged that you had met Sirius Black, but you wouldn't have been able to inform me of the circumstances behind your meeting, or what happened after," Madam Bones finished his thought.

Nodding, Harry said, "Yes. You must also take into account that you're not allowed to ask me to explain myself in depth. The laws of humane conduct have an article in section nine, which states that you cannot ask questions that would 'mentally impose upon a student's private life.'"

It was a law that had been created by the purebloods to keep aurors from asking their children questions that might get them in trouble. A lot pureblood houses had illegal side businesses. Even the "light houses" that followed Dumbledore were not pure in this regard. It had been a unanimous decision by the House of Lords to impose this law upon the Ministry of Magic.

"Which means you wouldn't have been able to give me a full accounting of what happened." Madam Bones sighed and pressed a hand to her forehead. "I understand your situation now, though I do not like it. You do realize that if you were an adult, I could have you thrown in Azkaban for obstructing justice?"

She was putting on airs. Harry, being who he was, could have gotten out of almost any charge against him. That said, were he not The-Boy-Who-Lived, then she could have easily put him in jail. He also understood the point she wanted to make, which was why he didn't argue.

"I realize that. However, I didn't want any information on Sirius Black leaking until I had Peter Pettigrew in captivity and presented to you."

"Speaking of," Professor Dumbledore interrupted, "You'll be pleased to know that both Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew are in our custody."

Harry shifted as a weight was lifted from his shoulders. "That's good. May I ask what's going to happen to them?"

"Since it's clear that Sirius Black did not kill Peter Pettigrew, we're going to give him a re-trial," Madam Bones said. "The fact that Pettigrew is alive brings into question everything we thought we knew about his case."

Harry frowned. "You mean you're going to give him his first trial. Sirius Black was never given a trial."

"What?" Madam Bones blinked.

"Sirius Black was never given a trial," Harry repeated. "The Ministry of Magic threw him into Azkaban without giving him a trial."

Madam Bones turned to Professor Dumbledore. "Is this true?"

The headmaster frowned, his half-moon spectacles glinting. "I do not know. I was not part of Sirius Black's case. Minister Bagnold told me that due to my biased toward Sirius Black, his case would be handled by another."

"Do you know who did preside over the trial?" asked Madame Bones, to which Headmaster Dumbledore shook his head.

"There was no trial," Harry stated again. "Lucius Malfoy made sure of that."

There was a moment of silence as Professor Dumbledore and Madam

Bones looked at Harry like he'd sprouted two extra heads. He didn't think he'd ever seen the headmaster so flabbergasted before. Had he really not known this?

"Lucius Malfoy?" Madam Bones blinked rapidly several times. "That... can't be right. He might've been able to get out of his charges because he has deep pockets, but..."

"My understanding is that he bribed the Minister to send Sirius Black to prison. Given the upheaval at the time, I imagine Minister Bagnold was more than happy to comply, especially since it meant her coffers became quite full," Harry said with a shrug.

"There was a rumor going around that she had accepted several bribes," Madam Bones murmured. "That was part of the reason she resigned as Prime Minister..."

The other reason Minister Bagnold had retired was because of how the war had gone. Under her leadership, the war against Voldemort had steadily been turning in the dark lord's favor. Had he not gone to kill Harry when he did, there was a good chance he would've won.

"So... Sirius Black never received a trial." Madam Bones suddenly looked tired with her shoulders slumped and her posture slouched. "I'll have to look into this, but if it's true, then even if he was guilty of his crimes, we wouldn't be able to hold him prisoner. Of course, if he's innocent, we'll also have to make reparations... this is becoming quite the mess."

They spoke for a while longer. Harry promised to reveal everything he knew about the circumstances surrounding Sirius, while also apologizing to both Madam Bones and Headmaster Dumbledore for deceiving them. After letting Harry know that she would be calling upon him again some time in the near future, Madam Bones left, leaving him with the headmaster and Madam Pomfrey.

"It seems this year is going to be another eventful one," the headmaster said lightly. There was a twinkle in his eyes.

Harry closed his eyes and slumped down. "Headmaster, I'm... sorry, for the way I've been acting."

"It is all right, Mr. Potter," Headmaster Dumbledore said, his voice reassuring. "I, too, understand what it's like to lose people you love."

"You too, huh?"

"Yes, I've lost many people in my time, including my brother and sister. It was difficult to move on after my sister died and my brother stopped speaking to me. However, all wounds of the heart fade in time, though I am afraid the scars left from such wounds will never fully heal."

He appreciated the headmaster's frankness. At the same time, it didn't really help him.

Harry clutched a hand to his chest, feeling the emotional pain as though it were a physical ache. "I already know this pain will never fade. I'm not so naive as to believe this is something that will ever heal or go away simply because I want it to."

He'd already tried doing that. He had pushed his friends away, he'd lost himself in his projects, he'd tried to run. It hadn't helped. All it had done was make him sink further into darkness. It had made him revert to the vile creature that he'd been before meeting Lisa Crawft. He felt his stomach bubble from just thinking about it.

"I suppose not," Headmaster Dumbledore allowed. After another moment of silence, the headmaster stood up and smiled at him. "Well, I believe I shall let you get some rest. Your friends should be by soon."

"I see. Thank you, Headmaster."

"Think nothing of it."

Dumbledore waved and left. Once more, Harry was left to his own devices.

XoX

During his time in the hospital wing, Harry was visited by all of his friends. Daphne and Susan had scolded him. According to them, what he'd done had been stupid, reckless, stupid, irresponsible, stupid, dumb beyond all

recognition, and stupid... in that order. Everyone else had sat back and watched with amused smiles as Harry was scolded like a child who'd stolen candy from a grocery store.

Later in the day, after his friends had left (been kicked out by Madam Pomfrey for making too much noise), Harry received a surprise visit from Professor Remus Lupin. The man strolled in, his expression slightly haggard, as if he'd been having trouble sleeping. Given what he must have learned about Sirius, Harry imagined the man was wracked with guilt.

"Harry," he greeted, sitting down on the chair like he was boneless.

"Professor Lupin," Harry said. "Or should I call you Moony?"

"Either one is fine," Remus replied with a weary smile. "I shouldn't be surprised you know about that nickname. I assume you also know about my relationship with your parents?"

Shrugging, Harry said, "I do. Sirius told me a lot about your adventures together."

That was, of course, only partially true. Sirius had indeed told Harry a lot, but Harry also remembered a lot. He recalled how Remus had visited them a few times, though he rarely stayed for long. His parents had always asked if he wanted to stay the night, especially during the full moon, but Remus had always declined.

"If you know about my past, that makes this easier." Despite his words, Professor Lupin looked like someone who'd just had a planet dropped onto his shoulders. "I owe you an apology. After your parents died, I went off on my own, abandoning the son of my two best friends in order to live a secular life of self pity. I never once thought about what you must have been going through and only cared about myself."

Harry sighed. This man was being pretty hard on himself. He thought it was deserved, but being rude or rubbing how much his life had sucked thanks to the professor's inaction, wouldn't benefit anyone.

"We all have our problems. I don't blame you for what happened in my

past, so you shouldn't either."

He thought about bringing up Professor Lupin's lycanthropy, but decided not to. It wouldn't help him here.

Professor Lupin smiled. "You're too kind."

"Has there been any news on Sirius and Pettigrew?" Harry asked.

The face Professor Lupin made was that of someone who'd swallowed a lemon. "I have not heard anything. It looks like Headmaster Dumbledore and Madam Bones are keeping everything related to this incident under wraps. The only reason I even know as much as I do is because I was the one who arrived on the scene first." Professor Lupin paused, grimacing as though remembering something unpleasant, and then he shook his head. "I never would have imagined that Pettigrew was alive."

"I doubt most people would," Harry said, already looking to head off Professor Lupin's pity party. Considering the number of months he'd been having his own pity party, he didn't want to deal with the professor's. "Pettigrew was cunning enough not to leave any evidence, and I doubt you'd have been able to find him since he'd disguised himself as the pet rat of the Weasley family."

"Yes, I suppose that's true." Professor Lupin tried to smile. "Still, I feel like I should have known that Sirius was innocent. He and James were as close as brothers."

Harry realized that if he didn't stop this man, then he would be forced to listen to Professor Lupin's self-recriminations, which were far too close to his own current issues with his friends. He changed the subject. Again.

"Would you mind telling me some stories about your time together at Hogwarts?"

For the first time since he'd entered, Professor Lupin's smile was genuine. "I would love to," he said, and then spent the next hour regaling Harry with stories of his parents.

XoX

The days passed by in relative peace—relative because there was a new hot topic that had come up since Sirius Black had infiltrated Hogwarts.

Harry didn't know how the rumors were started, but someone had found out at least something related to what happened with him and Sirius. Numerous theories were being discussed within the corridors. Everything from Sirius Black attacked him, to Sirius Black saved him, to Harry Potter fought against and single-handedly captured Sirius Black, had been bandied about.

Being the cause of these rumors, Harry had once again been forced to endure everyone he passed going silent, and then starting up again when they believed he was out of earshot. It was annoying—extremely so. However, there was nothing for it. He couldn't stop the rumors, and if he tried to stop them by saying something, then people would just come up with more rumors. This endless, vicious cycle was something he had grown used to.

It didn't help that Madam Bones had essentially sworn him to secrecy. He was neither allowed to confirm nor deny the rumors. Fortunately, people didn't ask him. He guessed they were too scared.

It had been a week since the incident with Sirius Black. Classes continued on as per the usual, Harry had been slowly regaining his former physical strength, and he'd become more comfortable with his friends. Even so, he still had moments where he felt guilt creep up on him. Thankfully, Daphne and Susan were there as support.

Perhaps it was because they knew most of his secrets, including his most important one, but Daphne and Susan had been a constant presence for the past week. At least one of them was always by his side. Whenever Harry went into a relapse, one of them would be there with a reassuring hand. It had become a habit for him to be holding at least one of their hands whenever they were sitting down. He believed it was their way of giving him strength.

He wasn't sure if the others had noticed. Blaise probably did. He was observant. However, he was also intelligent and knew better than to draw attention to it.

It was late afternoon. The mid-september air was crisp and refreshing. Leaves were spread across the ground, having fallen from their branches. The Black Lake appeared the same as always. Harry could see the giant squid waving a tentacle at some of the students standing by the shore, almost as if it were greeting them. The students waved back.

"Quidditch will be starting soon," Tracey said. "Do you plan on going out for the team this year?"

Harry thought about it for a moment, and then shook his head. "No, I don't think so. Quidditch is fun, but it doesn't give me the same thrill that something like sparring and dueling does."

He did enjoy flying, but not when playing Quidditch. Still, Harry mused that he was missing out on a good opportunity to regain his popularity within the Gryffindor house. On the other hand, if he soundly defeated every other house, they might not like him as much. If he wanted to reclaim his former popularity with all of the houses, then he needed to regain the precarious balance he had between being an exceptional student, yet not someone who constantly stood in the limelight. It was a lot harder than it sounded.

"That's too bad," Tracey sighed. "Thanks to Malfoy's father getting Slytherin brand new equipment, I have a feeling that sniveling dirt bag is going to win."

"Not very supportive of your house, are you, Trace?" Daphne asked rhetorically.

"Oh, can it," Tracey muttered. "I love our house just fine. It's Malfoy I hate, and since my hatred for Malfoy is greater than my love for Slytherin, well..."

"Malfoy isn't an easy individual to get along with," Blaise agreed with Tracey's words, nodding ever so slightly.

"Understatement of the century, Blaise."

"Has he been causing problems?" asked Harry.

Daphne shook her head. "He mostly keeps to himself these days, though he has amassed a small following since you went under. A lot of the younger students look up to him, and a few of the older students have been listening a little too often lately."

Hearing that made Harry want to sigh. Draco wasn't much of a threat, just a boy who thought he deserved the world because his father was rich. Dealing with him would not only be tiring, but it would also be more trouble than it was worth.

Still...

"Could you please keep an eye on him? You don't have to observe him closely. Just let me know if he starts acting strangely," Harry said.

Blaize nodded. "Since I share a dorm room with him, I'll keep my eyes out for anything unusual."

"I wouldn't worry about Malfoy," Astoria said. "I've met him once or twice before. The boy's a coward. I've never seen someone whose belly is yellower than his."

"I'm with Stori on this one," Tracey agreed.

Luna nodded. "He has a lot of nargles around him."

Conversation probably would have continued, but at that moment, Professor McGonagall, of all people, strolled onto the grass and walked over to them. Her movements were harried. There was a stilt in her step, as if she'd rushed down a flight of stairs and injured herself. She stopped in front of them. Her cheeks were slightly flushed.

"Mr. Potter, Headmaster Dumbledore would like to speak with you."

There couldn't have been many reasons for the headmaster to call him. In fact, Harry could think of only one reason for the headmaster to ask for a meeting.

"Do you mind if I come along as well?" asked Susan, who must have realized the same thing.

Professor McGonagall frowned, but when Harry gazed at her imploringly, she sighed. "Very well. You may also come. However, only you. Since your aunt is also here, I believe it would be nice if I let you see her. Nothing more."

So I was right.

Hearing that Madam Bones was also present made what they were calling him for even more obvious. It had to be Sirius. That was the only reason Madam Bones would have been at Hogwarts. Something big must have happened with Sirius, and they were going to tell him.

He stood up. Susan stood up with him and grabbed his hand. Her face was beat red. Harry guessed she was embarrassed. He tried not to let her embarrassment make him embarrassed. Matters weren't helped when, upon looking at their hands, Professor McGonagall's lips twitched into a smile.

"If you two will follow me," she said before turning around and walking back toward the castle.

They were lead to the headmaster's office. Professor McGonagall spoke the password, gumdrops, with an embarrassed blush on her face. Having never been to the headmaster's office before, Susan was startled when the stairs began to move. She squeaked and grabbed onto Harry.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm just surprised. Sorry."

"It's fine," Harry murmured as Professor McGonagall lead them down the steps and up to the door. She was just about to knock—

"Come in, Minerva."

—when a voice called out from the other side. Harry glanced at Professor McGonagall. A vein throbbed on her forehead, though she still opened the door, allowing him and Susan to proceed her.

Several people stood in the office, which was filled with knick knacks and

various odds and ends. Headmaster Dumbledore and Madam Bones were there, obviously, but there were also two other people. One of them was Professor Lupin, and the other was...

"Harry!" Sirius shouted with obnoxious joviality as he rushed over as if to hug him—only to pause. Harry did not like the gleam in his godfather's eyes. "Now who is this? Harry, you sly dog. Why didn't you tell me you had a girlfriend?"

While Susan turned red right down to the roots of her hair, Harry frowned. "Susan isn't my girlfriend... I think."

"You think?"

"Well... she is a girl, and a friend... but..."

Harry knew nothing of relationships. They were about the lowest point of interest on his list. He had neither the time nor the inclination to understand what it meant to be intimate with someone. Even if he was going through puberty and dreamed of doing various intimate acts, he wanted to wait until he'd accomplished his other goals before he even contemplated the idea of dating someone.

Sirius looked from him to Susan. "I think your friend might disagree."

Harry frowned at Sirius, but he didn't have time to deal with the man's comments on his relationship.

"It's... good to see you Sirius," Harry said at last. He took a deep breath. "I was... worried, um, when I realized you had infiltrated Hogwarts."

Sirius's eyes popped wide open, as though he couldn't believe what Harry had just said. "Was that... concern in your voice?"

Harry turned his head. He could feel heat rising to his cheeks. "N-no."

While Sirius looked ready to burst into a grin, Madam Bones walked forward and greeted Susan. "It's good to see you. I hadn't realized you were coming with Harry."

"I wanted to be with... Harry," Susan started off strong but ended in a quiet voice.

"I see." Madam Bones paused. "Well, if Harry is fine with you being here, then I see no problem. Headmaster?"

"I do not have a problem either," the headmaster replied with a twinkle in his eyes.

"In that case, I'd like to speak about what's going to happen within the next few days." Madam Bones coughed into her hand. "First, we are going to make a public announcement at a press conference that Peter Pettigrew is alive and has been caught. We'll make a public spectacle out of it by showing him at the press conference. We'll also state that Sirius Black has been cleared of all charges, but that he'll need to come forward to publically proclaim his innocence."

Nodding, Harry could already see where this was going. "I'm guessing Sirius will then turn up at the Ministry of Magic?"

Madam Bones, to his surprise, shook her head. "What we want to have happen is for you and Sirius to make an appearance together. If they see the Boy-Who-Lived with Sirius Black, then they're more likely to accept him. We'll hold another press conference then, and you'll tell everyone about what happened this summer; how you and Sirius reconnected and you discovered that he was innocent. It will give Sirius more plausibility."

"It will also let others know what happened to me during the summer, thereby putting a close to the many rumors that have been going around," Harry added with a nod. "This is a pretty cunning move, if you don't mind my saying so. I'd expect political maneuvering like this from someone like Celestina."

Madam Bones made a face. "I did consult with her on the matter. I don't know how, but she managed to find out about Sirius Black a few days after he was taken to the hospital." She shook her head and muttered something about "loose lips," which made Harry wonder about how far reaching that woman's hands were. "In any case, that's the basic plan so far. We're not going to make the announcement until after Halloween, so there's some time before anything happens. We need to make a lot of

preparations."

There was a pause in the conversation. Harry felt something similar to tension within the room, and he realized soon after that it was coming from Susan. Everything that was happening wasn't something normal students went through, or, indeed, even those with people in high positions. She was probably nervous. He squeezed her hand to reassure her, and was pleasantly surprised when she squeezed back.

Madam Bones continued. "In the meantime, Sirius Black is going to stay... wherever he's been staying." She eyed Sirius, who grinned and then made a zipping motion by his lips. Madme Bones gave an exhausted sigh. "I also want you to keep quiet about what's going on. I'm sure there are plenty of rumors going around Hogwarts. Don't verify any of them, even if someone comes up to you."

"Can I at least tell me my friends?" asked Harry, which caused Headmaster Dumbledore and Sirius to crack a smile. Even Madam Bones smiled a bit.

"Yes, you can inform them about what's happening, but do so where no one else can hear you." Harry nodded. "Well, that's all I wanted to speak about. Since I'm here, I would like to spend some time with my niece. Harry, I'll let you and Sirius talk for a few more minutes as well."

"Thank you, ma'am."

While Madam Bones took Susan over to a corner so they could talk, Sirius and Professor Lupin walked up to Harry. Meanwhile, Professor McGonagall and Headmaster Dumbledore remained in the background, mere observers to the proceedings.

"You look a lot better than the last time we saw each other," Sirius observed.

"I could say the same of you," Harry shot back. "You can thank my friends for being too stubborn to cut me loose."

"Those are some good friends," Sirius said.

"Yeah." Harry closed his eyes. "They are good friends."

"Say, Harry..." Sirius hesitated for a moment. "I know this is kinda out of the blue, but after all this is over and I'm a free man again, would you like to come and live with me? You don't have to, of course, but I thought it might be nice if we—"

"That," Harry interrupted, clutching at his chest. It felt hot. There was a stinging sensation that he didn't recognize. Taking a deep breath, he shunted the feeling aside and said, "I would love to."

Harry didn't know if he'd made the right choice, but when he noticed the look of relief on Sirius's face, and the slight smile that Professor Lupin wore, he decided that maybe, just maybe, it didn't matter.

XoX

Days passed by slowly, yet pass they did all the same. The fallen leaves had been cleared by the house elves, leaving the once grassy ground bare. Nights became colder and a chill seeped into the day's air. Halloween was coming.

Harry spent his time with his friends, going to class, studying, and helping everyone get ahead in the classes they were struggling with. With the passage of time, he became more comfortable around them. He no longer felt hesitant when he spoke to them, no longer worried about whether or not they had accepted him. Perhaps it was because what he'd been looking for from the very beginning hadn't been their forgiveness but his own.

Third years and above were allowed to, with permission from their parents/guardian, visit Hogsmeade, the small town next to Hogwarts. The first weekend trip was coming up. Despite not getting a guardian signature—since he had no guardian anymore after erasing the Dursley's memory of him—Harry was still allowed to go, thanks to Susan asking Madam Bones to pull some strings.

Early that morning, he and the others woke up and got ready for Hogsmeade. It was the weekend, so they didn't need to get up as early as usually, but the sun was still near the mountains when they all

congregated in the Great Hall for breakfast.

Everyone there conversed. They spoke of whatever caught their fancy, from quidditch and brooms, to school and history. Neville spoke with Hannah about her father's vineyards, or rather, he listened while she did most of the talking. Terry and Lisa were quietly conversing about their classes. Tracey talked to Blaize about their respective families. Meanwhile, Daphne was consoling a sulking Astoria, who's pout made her look like a super adorable version of her older sister.

"Come on. Don't pout, Stori. There's no reason to."

"But I wanted to go with all of you to Hogsmeade," Astoria complained.

Daphne gave her sister a consoling smile. "None of us were able to go to Hogsmeade our first two years. What makes you think it would be any different for you? Besides, you have plenty of friends. You and Luna should hang out with them."

Astoria was vastly different from her sister, which showed in how she interacted with everybody. A social butterfly, Astoria was always smiling, always enthusiastically chatting with people in the All House Common Room, and always getting involved in whatever activities were being held at the time. Harry had seen her playing everything from soccer to makeshift quidditch games. Sometimes she'd be sitting with first years of various houses in study groups. In fact, the only first year group she didn't talk to was the Slytherins, and that was because they'd been drinking Draco Malfoy's koolaid.

The situation between him and Astoria was still tense. She greeted him with kurt politeness, always referring to him as "Potter" instead of "Harry." He had an intense feeling that she hadn't forgiven him for what he'd done to Daphne, but that was okay. It just meant he had to earn her trust.

The journey to Hogsmeade didn't happen until after lunch. Harry and his friends spent that time playing a game that he'd devised called magical shooter. It was basically a mock battle between two forces. Using the color changing spell, two sides would fight each other. When someone was hit, they "died" and had to sit down in the spot where they'd been slain. It had been a fun way to spend the next two hours, though most

everyone had gotten too tired near the end to play and spent the remainder of their time lying on the grass.

After the game, they were taken to Hogsmeade by carriage, the same carriages that were pulled by the thestrals. Despite there being nine of them in total, they were able to easily fit thanks to the expansion charm. Harry didn't know how the teachers felt about him expanding their property. However, he'd rather they all be together than not.

Hogsmeade was the only all-wizarding village within Great Britain. It was by Hengist of Woodcroft, a wizard born in the middle ages. Harry had a card of him that he'd gotten from a chocolate frog.

When the carriage slowed to a halt, he and Blaize opened the doors, stepped out, and helped their female companions exit the vehicle.

"Thank you, Harry." Daphne smiled as she placed her hand in his, allowing him to help her down the steps. It was a far cry from their first year. He still remembered how she'd originally looked at his extended hand like it was covered in viral diseases.

Their feet tapped against the hard pavement. Hogsmeade wasn't what Harry would reasonably call a village. It was more like a hamlet, a small community that appeared to have been transported straight from the middle ages. There were only a few houses and several places to visit. All of the buildings were thatched roofed and brick walled. Harry turned his head this way and that as they walked along the road, traveling ever deeper into the village.

"Where should we go first?" asked Lisa, pondering the question with more seriousness than it probably warranted.

"Honeydukes!" Tracey and Hannah said at the same time.

Harry looked at Daphne and Susan, then at the others. Blaize was sighing and shaking his head, his expression resigned, while Neville, Terry, and Lisa wore hopeful expressions.

"Honeydukes?" he asked.

Everyone else nodded. "Honeydukes," they said in unison.

Thus their first stop of the day was Honeydukes, a wizarding sweet shop that was famous for its chocolates and many myriad of sweets. It was already filled with people when they entered. People were crowding every aisle, chittering like excited squirrels. Daphne apologized when someone bumped into her, shoving her against Harry, who in turn bumped into Tracey.

"Bloody hell, this place is crowded," she grumbled.

"Language, Trace."

"Whatever, Mom."

Harry eyed the many shelves, all of which were lined with succulent-looking sweets that made him want to gag. Nougat, pink squares of coconut ice, honey-coloured toffee... they had hundreds of different types of chocolate lined up in neat rows. There was a large barrel of Every Flavour Beans, another topped with Fizzing Whizzbees—levitating cherbert balls—and they even had one wall covered with Special Effects sweets like Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, or Toothflossing Stringmints, and even Ice Mice.

Having never been a sweets person, Harry felt sick just standing in there.

"All right!" Hannah cheered. "It's time to get some sweets!"

"Chocolate time!" Tracey cheered right alongside her.

They all split up, going off to grab their favorite treats. Since Harry wasn't one for sweets, he didn't partake like the others did. Instead, he wandered around the store with Daphne, who also didn't eat many sweets but was shopping for her younger sister. She grabbed sugar quills, pixie puffs, and treacle fudge. Those appeared to be her sister's favorites. Harry wondered if he should also get Astoria something as a means of bridging the gap between them, but he decided against it. She'd probably see through such an ill-fated attempt.

He and Daphne were the first ones out. Neither of them were a true fan

of crowds, so they waited outside while everyone else bought their sweets. Sitting on a bench several meters from the store, Harry breathed in the crisp air. Next to him, Daphne looked in her bag to make sure none of her sweets had broken while they made it to the exit. There had been a lot of jostling, pushing, and prodding to get out.

"I notice you didn't get anything for yourself," Harry commented. "Nothing to your taste?"

"I've never been much of a sweets fan," Daphne admitted. "What about you? I notice that you didn't buy anything."

"Sweets and I don't mix," Harry returned. Daphne raised a hand to her lips and giggled, causing him to grin.

Their friends came out of the store in ones and twos, gathering over by the bench when they spotted him and Daphne. When everyone had exited, they decided it was high time they went to The Three Broomsticks.

As Harry's feet clomped on the hardwood floor, he was greeted to a warm atmosphere with lamps located on lintel posts and a ribbed ceiling. Tables were interspersed across the floor. Dozens of patrons sat around those tables, or in the booths pressed against the walls. At the far end sat a bar, near which dozens of people gathered, laughing merrily as they drank from mugs filled with frothing liquid.

A middle-aged woman with blond hair and a charming smile strolled past them and said, "Find a seat anywhere. I'll be with ya in just a second!" before hurrying back into the throng of people. Harry could hear her shouting at several customers to "behave themselves," though she didn't sound angry.

"Well," Susan started, "Let's find a place to sit."

Even though she said that, finding a spot to sit was difficult. The place was packed. They were also a group of nine, and most of the tables only sat four. After worming their way through the crowd, Harry and the others eventually found a nice group of people who were willing to cede their booth to them. It was still too small, but Harry cast a modified version of

the expansion charm to make just the seat and table larger.

"I'll never understand how can you modify magic on the spot like that," Hannah mumbled.

"You changed the arithmetic equation of the spell, didn't you?" Lisa inquired.

"More like modified." Harry frowned as he flicked wand back into its holster and sat down. He scooted over for Daphne, who slid in next to him. It wasn't long before her hand slid into his under the table. "Since it's a charm, it's easy enough to modify the equation to only enlarge specific objects while leaving out everything else. Transfiguring this table would have taken a lot more arithmetic modifications, since transfiguration is more scientific in nature."

As he and Lisa discussed the merits of spell modification, Tracey looked at Daphne. "You're boyfriend is being a nerd again."

"And you're being a pest." Daphne snapped, blushing, to which she merely received a grin.

Harry frowned at the comment. He wasn't sure how to take that, though he understood that Tracey was just teasing Daphne. Did they really appear as if they were dating? Should he be happy about that? Well, the idea had its appeal. Many of his dreams had featured Daphne in them, but he didn't think that was a good reason to start dating someone. However, once they were older, and he had accomplished his goals, if she wasn't averse to the idea, then...

Then... what?

Romance had never been Harry's priority. His goals were to make his parents proud by reshaping the wizarding world, and while he intended to eventually have kids, that wouldn't happen until much later. At the moment, he was too young and had too much on his plate. He couldn't be worrying about romance.

Besides... if I start dating Daphne, then what about Lisa?

His non-magical friend was another problem that he would have to face. He'd vanished without a trace, not telling her a single thing. How worried must she have been to arrive at the Dursley's one day, only to discover that they had no recollection of him?

One thing's for sure, Harry sighed to himself as he continued speaking with Lisa, *this Christmas is going to be troublesome*.

XoX

Harry had become used to doing something on Halloween. During his second year at Hogwarts, rather than lock himself up somewhere—or kill a troll—he had spent that day with his friends. They'd eaten, conversed, and laughed. It had been fun.

This year was shaping up to be much the same.

That morning, as Harry entered the Great Hall with his friends, he was forced to duck low as a swarm of bats flew overhead. Blinking, he looked back inside to find that much of the Great Hall was decorated. The tables were still there, but they had been painted in orange and black. Pumpkins sat on the tables, and all of the food had been transfigured to look like halloween symbols: jack o'lanterns and bats and green-faced witches with a wart on their noses. That last one threw him off. It was so mundane.

Streamers hung from the ceiling. They must have been charmed for they were constantly changing color. As Harry walked over to the Gryffindor table with his friends, several loud popping noises erupted from the floor. He glanced down to see what looked like miniature fireworks. They didn't seem to be actual fireworks, though, because they didn't hurt. He stepped on another one and it popped, the sound echoing off the walls.

"Looks like the party's already started, hasn't it?" asked Tracey as they all sat down.

"Certainly seems so," Lisa said in a cool voice.

"What do you think about them?" Susan asked Daphne, who pondered the question as the blonde girl put French toast shaped like brooms on

her plate.

"I think they're excessive. Also, the tables are going to be removed, right? Why bother adding so many decorations when they still have to get these out?"

"Because it's awesome," said Tracey.

Daphne stared at her friend. "You have a way with words that I never will."

"Was that a compliment?"

"No."

The Halloween party was going to be much larger than the one last year. Professor McGonagall had informed the Gryffindors that it was going to be more like a gathering than a simple dinner. It was apparently a suggestion from the Hogwarts Board of Directors, which was headed by Lucius Malfoy.

Harry suspected that he'd funded this idea to counteract the popularity Harry had received due to all of the changes he'd made last year. It was a well-played move. Harry couldn't undermine it, especially since he'd been busy sulking by himself. Perhaps if he'd not been so absorbed in his own angst, this wouldn't have happened.

While Tracey placed a hand against her chest as if Daphne's words had wounded her, Blaize pulled strange, multi-colored string from his hair. "I hope they clean this place a bit before the feast. This stuff will get in our food."

"I'm sure the staff has planned for that eventuality," Terry said.

"I'm just excited by the idea of a party," Neville added.

Conversation continued, though they relocated after breakfast. They didn't have class that morning or first period. The group ended up gathering in the All House Common Room. There were already several people from other houses; one group was playing Exploding Snaps, but

another was playing the muggle board game Monopoly. Harry and the others went over to the fireplace and sat down on the plushy pillows or took a spot on the floor.

"Say, Harry?" Susan, who'd taken a spot on the floor to his left, started.

"Yes?"

Twirling a strand of red hair between her fingers, Susan asked, "I was just wondering if you had any plans for the Chamber of Secrets now that you're not staying there..."

Harry managed to contain his wince, but just barely. "Once I get the basilisk converted to saleable parts, I plan on turning it into a gym and workstation."

"Workstation?" Daphne inquired. She was sitting next to Tracey, who sat on the floor, her legs crossed and flapping like a butterfly's wings.

"That's right." Harry nodded. "Even if I plan on shelving some of my projects, there's still a lot of stuff I want to work on that I don't want other people getting into."

"Are they dangerous?" asked Lisa.

"Some of them are."

"Are you going to tell us what they are?" asked Tracey—only to be kicked by Daphne. "Ow! The bloody hell was that for?!"

"For being intrusive," Daphne said.

"I'll show you intrusive," Tracey declared with a menacing shake of her fist.

"I don't intend on hiding my projects from you," Harry said. "You guys can come in and watch as I work. Just please, for your own safety, don't touch any of them. Some of them are volatile."

"I'm now feeling the desire not to go near the Chamber of Secrets

anymore," Tracey admitted shamelessly, to which Daphne elbowed her. "Owch!"

Harry had three classes that day: Charms, Study of Ancient Runes, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. Charms was the easiest of his lessons. They weren't learning anything particularly difficult, and since he'd studied ahead during his last two years, he already knew all of the content.

Of course, Harry had studied ahead on all of his courses. Last year, before Hermione had been killed, he'd been up to his fifth year in all of his classes. Even the electives were courses that he'd studied up on a bit more than was expected of a third year. He'd just begun learning about fourth year arithmancy, and he was halfway through his third year of ancient runes.

Arithmancy was easier than runes. Being a math based subject, it was something that he excelled in, and he had plenty of experience with mathematical equations. Arithmancy was a lot like algebra. They learned about prime numbers, the equations that spells were made of, and how those equations worked to form spells. Out of all his electives, arithmancy was the one where he didn't really need to study ahead because his background made him already familiar with the concept.

During those periods, Harry tried to be helpful by not only participating in class, but helping others solve the problems without giving them the answer. It was best to let people come to the conclusion on their own. While some of his peers were still wary, they slowly came around as he lent them his aid.

"Hey, Harry?" Daphne whispered into his ear. "Can you check to see if this is correct? I'd like to have my answer double-checked before determining that it's finished."

It was Study of Ancient Runes. Their current task was reconstructing the theoretic runic sequence to create the names of one of the old Norse gods using Eldar Futhark runes. He, Lisa, Terry, and Daphne were all sitting together.

"Sure," Harry murmured back.

He scooted behind Daphne, ignoring the fresh scent of her hair, and peered at her work from over her shoulder. She had chosen to reconstruct Freya's name. The runic sequence went as followed: Fehu, Uruz, Thurisaz, Ansuz, Raidho, Kenaz, Gebo, and Wunjo.

Runes are broken into three sections or groups of eight, called aett (aettir, plural). This helps one to remember their order, and it has significance in magical uses. First, the rune name is given, then its phonetic value, its symbolic image, and finally, the esoteric meaning used in divination.

"This is correct," Harry said at last. "However, you'll want to fix up your line right here for Kenaz. See how it's a little crooked? If you were to activate this rune with that, it would blow up in your face."

Daphne nodded and, after using a spell to clear away the the ink, she recreated the Kenaz symbol, which looked a lot like a sideways "v".

"Much better," Harry approved. Daphne smiled at him.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was Harry's last class of the day. They were currently learning about grindylows and how to deal with them. That evening, Professor Lupin had acquired one from the Black Lake to show to the class.

Grindylows were ugly creatures. They had sickly green skin and tentacles for locomotion. Their faces looked stretched and taut, undulating as if their muscles were made of gelatin. The one that had been presented to them would use its long, spindly fingers to pull faces at them through the glass of its small aquarium. Harry wondered if all magical creatures were jerks. The pixies had acted the same way.

Professor Lupin had given them homework, a one foot essay on the grindylows strengths and weaknesses. Harry and the others, wanting to get it out of the way quickly, went to the All House Common Room and finished the paper before the Halloween Party. This would let them enjoy the party without worrying about homework.

Since it was a wizarding party, no one dressed up in costumes. That was a non-magical tradition. Later in the evening, he, Neville, and Astoria

came down from their dorm with the rest of the Gryffindors and made for the Great Hall.

"You look awfully cute in that dress, Stori," Harry complimented.

Astoria had chosen to wear a red dress that was several shades lighter than the Gryffindor colors. It was highlighted with gold at the hems, but was otherwise plain.

"It's Astoria," she corrected. "Just because I don't think you're a bad guy, that doesn't mean I'm going to let you call me that. Only Daphne can call me that."

"Man, that was harsh," Harry murmured.

"Sounds like she still doesn't like you," Neville teased.

"It's not that I dislike him," Astoria corrected. "I just don't care about him one way or the other."

Sighing as he scratched the back of his head, Harry realized that he still had a long way to go with Astoria. She would often treat him like this. Her words, her tone, everything was spoken in slight sarcasm, but it was only with him. She greeted everyone else with smiles and kind words, unless she was pulling a prank with the Weasley twins.

The Great Hall, when they entered, appeared to have their decorations finished. The tables had been moved out of the way, and in their place were several circular tables with food and... pumpkin juice. Streamers still hung from the ceiling, and bats circled the streamers. The ghosts were also mingling with the students. Giant jack o'lanterns sat along the walls, charmed to move in time to the music, a spooky song from a Weird Sisters cover band who were playing on the teacher's podium, which had been transformed into a makeshift performance stage.

Several people called out to Astoria, a group of girls who were waving her over. Since no one was wearing their robes, it was hard to judge which house they were from, but Harry had memorized their faces and knew they were a combination of Ravenclaws, Gryffindors, and Hufflepuffs. Luna was one of the people there. There were no Slytherins.

"Tell my sister that I'll meet up with her later," Astoria said before traveling over to her friends. Harry watched as Luna and Astoria greeted each other, and then the group moved off.

"She's much more of a social butterfly than her sister, isn't she?" asked Neville.

Harry would have agreed, but Daphne spoke up behind them a second later. "Who's much more of a social butterfly than me?"

Neville twirled around, face paling. He stuttered something out, but then his cheeks went beat red and he fell silent. Harry didn't blame him.

The girls must have all decided unanimously to dress up, because all of them were wearing dresses. They weren't particularly stunning. Indeed, they were just regular dresses of varying color. However, there was a certain charm to seeing several cute girls in dresses. Harry thought that Susan's red dress suited her quite well, and Daphne always looked good in green.

"You girls look stunning," Harry said with a bright smile.

The reactions were interesting. While Daphne accepted his compliment with a gracious smile, Susan blushed down to the roots of her hair. Meanwhile, Tracey and Hannah wore satisfied grins. Lisa's smile was small but noticeable. Her cheeks were a touch pink.

"Thank you," Daphne said, accepting Harry's hand as he extended it to her.

"I somehow feel like we were only complimented because Harry was being polite now," Tracey said.

"That's not true at all," Harry admonished them. "I'd never say something I didn't mean."

"But you'll stretch the truth," Tracey rebutted.

"Only with people I don't like," he fired back.

"Please not now," Lisa said. "Can't we enjoy the party like normal people?"

"This is normal," Tracey defended herself.

As the girls ganged up on Tracey about what was "normal," Blaize, Neville, and Terry went up to Harry, who was still holding hands with Daphne.

"I'm not sure why the girls decided to dress up," Blaize said. "It's not like this is a political function. Simple clothing would have been fine."

Despite his words, the silk shirt, creased pants, and shiny black shoes that Blaize wore could have only been the height of fashion. He looked even more dressed up than the girls.

"You only say that because you don't understand how we girls think," Daphne said.

"And... how do girls think?" asked Neville.

"A lot differently than boys."

"I'll second that," Harry agreed.

"By the way," Terry started, "what do you guys think of this party?"

"I think it's a poorly constructed political ploy by Lucius Malfoy," Harry said with a grunt.

Neville and Blaize shared an amused glance. "Is that so?" asked Blaize. "Are you sure it's not jealousy that you hadn't thought of it first?"

Harry just clicked his tongue. He was not jealous. Not at all.

... He wasn't.

XoX

The party had lasted until midnight. Nothing had happened. Harry didn't know why he was so surprised, as it wasn't like Lucius Malfoy could just

randomly show up at a Halloween party meant for the students of Hogwarts. At the same time, he had been expecting just that. It made him wonder about Lucius's motives.

Having gone to bed so late, no one went to exercise the next morning. It was Saturday anyway, so they didn't have classes.

Harry went down to breakfast with Neville. Astoria had joined them, though she'd claimed it was only because she wanted to eat with her sister. Very few people were in the Great Hall that morning, which appeared pristine, as if the party last night never happened. Harry determined that most of the students were sleeping in. He didn't blame them. If it wasn't for his internal alarm clock, he would have probably still been asleep as well.

None of his other friends were there, leading him to believe they were still asleep or just waking up. Since that was the case, Harry sat down at the Ravenclaw table and slowly grabbed a bowl of oatmeal, some milk, almonds, and fruits. Neville and Astoria sat beside him and piled their plates with pancakes and bacon.

"It looked like you and my sister had a good time at the party," Astoria said, her tone conversational, though Harry thought he detected underlying currents of tension.

"Yes... I suppose we did," Harry admitted.

Daphne had never strayed far from Harry during the party. Thinking on it, Susan hadn't either. They were probably keeping an eye on him, making sure he didn't suffer from a relapse. Regardless of their reasons, he wouldn't deny that spending time with them had been pleasant.

"Do you like my sister?"

While Neville did a spit take, spraying pumpkin juice all over the table, Harry paused, his spoon halfway to his mouth. Slowly, he set the spoon back down and regarded Astoria with a speculative glance.

I could play the ignorance card, but that wouldn't get me anywhere...

He understood that Astoria wasn't talking about liking Daphne as a friend; she wanted to know if he liked her romantically, like the kind of like found in one of Lisa's trashy romance novels.

I'd better be honest.

"I don't know," Harry said, shrugging. "I think Daphne's attractive, I like her, but I've never thought about romance before."

Actually, he actively tried to avoid it because he didn't want to deal with the trouble that came with it. He didn't like the idea of being romantically involved with someone when he was this young. Even though he was undergoing puberty, even though he had sexual thoughts, the idea of him someone dating wasn't appealing.

"And what if I said that my sister liked you?" Astoria continued.

"I'm not sure how that would change my opinion." Harry frowned. "Why are you asking me this?"

Shrugging, Astoria cut slice of her pancake and stuck it in her mouth. Harry remained silent as she swallowed her food. "Because I'm trying to gauge whether or not you'd really do anything to help my sister."

"If you're asking me whether or not I'd be willing to marry your sister in the future... then you'd have to ask me in the future."

As a political idea, marrying Daphne to get her out from underneath her father had merit, but he didn't know if that was what Daphne wanted. What's more, was that something he wanted? It wasn't often that Harry would admit to being his age, but even he believed that contemplating marriage was something that someone his age shouldn't do.

Astoria must have realized this, because she nodded seconds later. "Fair enough. Though you should be prepared with an answer the next time I ask you this."

"Understood," Harry said.

"I have no clue what you two are talking about anymore," Neville finally

admitted.

"That's probably a good thing," Harry added, Astoria nodding along.

As morning wore on, people eventually trudged in for breakfast. Daphne walked in with a yawning Tracey and a frowning Blaise. She greeted her sister with a tender kiss on the temple before sitting in between her and Harry, to whom she offered a smile. Susan and Hannah came in next, with Susan taking his other side, and then Terry and Lisa arrived a few minutes after them.

As more and more people arrived, the owls started coming in. Harry looked up as he felt a presence poke at his mind. It was a presence he hadn't felt in some time. The joy he felt at feeling Hedwig again was shocking, but he couldn't deny his happiness as the white owl set down in front of him and her presence caressed his mind.

"Good morning, Hedwig," Harry said. He grabbed a piece of bacon and held it out to her. She took the bacon—then she bit his hand hard enough to draw blood. "Ouch! What was that for?"

"Hoot!"

"I know I was being an idiot before, but that's no reason to bite me."

"Hoot!"

"Well... yes, it is my fault—b-but I've already expressed my remorse."

Hedwig glared, causing Harry to turn away. She hooted again.

"A-all right. Fine. I'm sorry, Hedwig. I didn't mean to shut you out." Another hoot. "And I'll give you extra bacon every night."

Hedwig nodded once as if satisfied, and then she allowed him to pet her.

Astoria leaned into Daphne and whispered, "Does this happen often?"

Daphne's answering grin made Astoria lean back. "More often than you might think."

"Uh-huh..."

Tracey was grinning. "Man, that bird has you whipped."

Harry clicked his tongue but didn't say anything. He was too busy fighting against a blush.

After Hedwig had gotten her fill of pampering, she alighted and took off, disappearing out the window. Laying on the table where she'd been standing was a newspaper. It had been unrolled. Peter Pettigrew, alive and well, if incredibly frightened, was on the front cover. The title read: *PETTIGREW ALIVE?! SIRIUS BLACK INNOCENT!* in big, bold print.

Harry smiled. It looked like Madam Bones' plan had begun.

Another quick update! I'm already working on chapter 12, so I'm hoping to have that out next Friday. Anyway, I hope you all are enjoying the story. ^_^

The Press Conference

Chapter 12

The Press Conference

The Ministry of Magic's auditorium was located within the heart of the ministry. It was a vast space shaped like a bowl. Numerous seats lined the inside, ascending upwards like a series of stairs. Balconies where the press and nobility were given an unobstructed view of the proceedings hung from the walls like dozens of protruding ledges.

Amelia stood before the crowd, atop a stage and looking at everyone. There must have been a ten-thousand people gathered to witness this emergency press conference, which she'd only been able to call with the combined help of Celestina and the Dowager Longbottom. Both of the people who had helped her were also on the podium, sitting down on a pair of chairs with several of their allies, though it looked like the Dowager was doing all in her power to stay as far from Celestina as possible. Minister Fudge, who sat between the two, was nervously gripping his bowler cap.

"I would like to thank all of you for coming today," Madam Bones started. "This emergency press conference was called for only one reason, to inform you all about new circumstances that have been uncovered regarding Sirius Black."

Hushed murmuring swept through the crowd. She couldn't see their faces. They were too far away, causing their appearance to blur into a uniform of general shapes. However, she could imagine the expressions they wore, unbridled curiosity, fear. Sirius Black had been big news since his escape from Azkaban. Everyone had been on the lookout for him, and now, here she was with important information pertaining to magical Britain's most wanted criminal.

"Several weeks ago, Sirius Black somehow managed to infiltrate Hogwarts. What you don't know is that Sirius Black did so to find Peter

Pettigrew, a man who we all thought had been killed by Sirius Black himself. From the recent information we've uncovered, it's clear that Peter Pettigrew has been deceiving all of us right from the start. That night twelve years ago, he did not die at the hands of Sirius Black, but cut off his own finger and blew up several muggles before escaping into the sewer. Since then, he's been hiding out as a pet rat in a magical home."

The crowd broke out into shouts. Everyone began talking all at once, their voices rising higher and higher until not even a Sonorus Charm would be able to effectively speak above them. Madam Bones was forced to stand still and wait until the crowd subsided enough for her to begin shouting them down.

"However, thanks to the fast work of our aurors and Professor Lupin, the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts, we were able to apprehend Peter Pettigrew!"

At those words, several aurors walked onto the stage, their cloaks swirling about them. One of them was Nymphadora Tonks, who took the front. Taking up the rear was Kinglsey Shacklebolt, and Mad Eye Moody, who was not auror but had agreed to come on anyway, led the in-chains Peter Pettigrew.

Pettigrew had never looked so pathetic. Eyes quivering, lips trembling, and snot dribbling from his nose, the man who'd once been a friend to the Potters looked every bit the sniveling rat. A chain was attached to his neck, enchanted to keep him from turning into his rat form. More chains kept his hands bound. They were attached to another chain that Tonks used to pull the reluctant man along.

"This is the real criminal," Amelia announced to everyone. "Twelve years ago, Peter Pettigrew gave away the Potter's location to Lord Voldemort!" The crowd shrieked at the dark lord's name, but Amelia ignored it. "He betrayed his best friend! When Sirius Black went to confront him, Pettigrew accused Black of betraying the Potters, cut off his own finger, and fled into the sewers. Thanks to him, an innocent man was put in Azkaban prison! We of the Ministry of Magic will not let this injustice stand! As of now, Peter Pettigrew is being placed on trial for the betrayal and murder of the Potters!"

A roar of applause went up, thunderous and overwhelming as it echoed across the stadium they were using for the press conference.

"Furthermore," Amelia continued, "I would like to extend both the Ministry's heartfelt apology toward Sirius Black for the grave offense we've committed against him. That is why, on the twenty-fourth of November, we would like to request that Sirius Black come to another press conference, where we shall hold a public apology toward a man who was wrongfully accused of heinous crimes he didn't commit. I would like to thank everyone who attended this function. That is all."

Amelia turned around and headed to the back of the stage. Celestina and the Dowager Longbottom both stood up. Minister Fudge, after a moment of indecision, also stood and followed her out.

"Amelia... are you sure this is a good idea?" Minister Fudge asked.

"It's the only thing we can do right now," Amelia answered. "Sirius Black never received a trial, so we cannot hold him accountable anymore, even if he was responsible for the Potter's death. What's more, he was wrongfully accused and the real criminal has been caught. In order to mitigate the backlash that the Ministry is sure to receive, we need to make sure Sirius Black is on our side."

"It's a common rule in politics that one must appeal to the emotions of the masses if they want to have the backing of the people," Celestina said.

"I fail to see how making a spectacle will do us any good," the Dowager Longbottom retorted.

"That's because you're an old hag who's used to doing things the old-fashion way," Celestine responded with a brilliant smile.

"Better to be an old hag than a vile murderer, Black Widow."

"Oh, my." Celestina raised a hand to her lips, covering what was no doubt a dangerous smile. "I'll have you know that all my husbands have died from natural causes."

"I'm sure," the Dowager Longbottom snorted.

"Could you two please stop arguing," Amelia grunted. "Right now, we must focus on helping Sirius Black and containing any backlash that we might receive because of the previous minister's blunder."

"True enough," the Dowager said.

"I can agree to that," Celestina added.

"Thank you."

"What should I do?" Minister Fudge asked.

"Don't get in our way," Celestina suggested with a charming curve of her lips.

"Pretend you're doing something when you're really not," the Dowager Longbottom added.

Minister Fudge twitched.

XoX

Two weeks passed in the blink of an eye. Classes had slowed to a crawl, but Harry didn't mind. He already had a lot on his plate, not just with reintegrating himself into society, but also with all of the tasks he'd set before himself.

First and foremost among the many things he needed to do was get rid of the basilisk. He couldn't create his ideal workspace if a massive, 20 meter long carcass was lying around. Sadly, he'd not had a chance to meet with Headmaster Dumbledore since Madam Bones had called for him, and it wasn't like he could just barge into the headmaster's office uninvited.

To that end, Harry had asked if Professor McGonagall could inform the headmaster that he would like to speak with him. She'd done as asked. However, thanks to the recent press conference, the headmaster had been busy. It was to be expected. News of Sirius Black's innocent and Pettigrew's betrayal had sent ripples through the wizarding world. By now, there wasn't a single person who didn't know about what had

happened.

Harry was grateful to Madam Bones's press conference. While rumors floated around and spread like wildfire, none of them were about him anymore. All anyone talked about was Sirius Black. He felt like he was getting a much needed break from the rumor mill.

It was Saturday morning, and being a weekend, it meant he and the others didn't have classes. They'd also finished all of their homework. This meant they could enjoy the day. Of course, Harry's idea of enjoying the day was being active, and so while some of his friends sat on the sidelines and watched, he along with Neville, Tracey, Daphne, Susan, and Blaize, played a game of magic tag.

Harry wore a fierce grin as he wove between a storm of spellfire. Green jets of energy shot at him, but he juked left and right, avoiding the attacks while knocking a few back with deft flicks of his wand. Neville and Susan, who were firing at him, frowned and redoubled their attacks. None of them hit.

A little ways over, Daphne and Tracey were fighting against Blaize, who proved himself to be an admirable duelist. The tall, dark-skinned student took a minimalist approach to dueling. He relied mostly on his shield, and only moved when necessary. Sadly for him, he couldn't return fire because Tracey and Daphne were keeping the pressure on him. It was a good thing they were only using a simple color changing spell. Had they been using stronger magic, Daphne would have already broken through that shield.

"Ugh, I can't hit him!" Neville complained as he sent two more spells in rapid succession.

"He's like a gazelle," Susan agreed. Her wand was a network of constantly shifting patterns. The tip blazed green as she sought a hole in his defense. However, the best defense was always to not be where someone was attacking, thus there were no holes present.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Harry said as he dodged seven more spells. They were trying to hem him in now. Neville and Susan were on either side of him, shooting spells along his back and front flanks. He

could see the pattern. They were creating a net with which they hoped to trap him.

It's not going to work that way.

Narrowing his eyes, Harry reinforced his body with magic and moved faster. Spells flew toward him and were swatted from the air like flies. He then retaliated with his own spellfire, a barrage of color changing spells that hurtled toward Neville and Susan so quickly they barely had enough time to put up a shield.

Frowning, Harry ceased his attacks. He waited and watched as his spells splashed harmlessly against the shield. Then, once Neville and Susan felt safe enough to put the shield down, he launched two more spells that struck them in the chest and stomach respectively, dying their clothing bright pink.

Neville looked down at his now pink chest and grimaced. "Looks like I lost again. I really thought we had you this time."

"I have a lot of experience when it comes to dodging multiple opponents," Harry admitted. "However, you two did quite well against me. I hadn't expected to face such strong opposition. If it weren't for the short pause when you dropped your shield, I wouldn't have been able to get a single shot in."

He wiped the sweat from his forehead as Susan cast a freshening charm on herself. Deciding that her idea was a great one, Harry did the same, glancing at the battle between Daphne and Tracey against Blaize. It looked like that battle was winding to a close. Tracey was out, her shirt colored green, but Daphne was still fighting the strong fight.

Now that Tracey was no longer fighting with her, Daphne seemed to have decided to go full thrust. Light blasted from the tip of her wand in successive blasts. It was almost like a constant stream. What's more, the way she moved reminded Harry of a dancer, all grace and elegance. She wove around Blaize's attempts at returning fire. Unlike her opponent, who relied on shields, the blonde girl seemed to prefer movement like Harry. The battle ended when she timed an attack to hit Blaize mere seconds after he was forced to dodge her previous attack. The spell hit his hair,

making it turn pink.

Tracey crowed. "That's a good look for you, Blaize!"

Blaize clicked his tongue. "Coming from a woman whose entire body looks like that of a jester, your words lack the impact they should have."

Tracey's cheeks swelled like a pair of balloons, expressing her clear dissatisfaction at being verbally bested. Meanwhile, Blaize cast a freshening charm on himself, removed the green from his hair, and sighed.

"I can't believe you beat me so easily," he said.

Daphne could only shrug. "I know more about dueling than you. Besides, once Tracey went down, I was able to fight without needing to make sure our spells were in sync."

"Wait a minute. What do you mean 'in sync?'" Tracey's face scrunched up. "Does that mean you were holding back on my account."

"Yes."

"That is so not cool!"

"Life's not cool."

"Big sis," Astoria grinned as she bounded up to Daphne. "That was amazing! You're such an incredible duelist!"

Daphne smiled and tenderly ruffled her sister's hair. "Thank you. I'm glad you think so, though Harry is a much better duelist than me."

Astoria crossed her arms and huffed. "Hmph! Who cares about him?"

Harry sent Daphne a sidelong glance, to which she shrugged and smiled, causing him to sigh.

With the game at an end, the group decided to head back inside. Since it was November, the air was becoming quite chilly. Their breath was even

beginning to mist as they breathed, and none of them wanted to stay out there any longer than necessary, even with warming charms.

As they were entering through a massive set of doors, which lead into a courtyard, Professor Lupin passed by the entrance. There was a heavy presence to his step. Harry thought he seemed more haggard than normal. His face was gaunt and appeared exhausted, though he smiled upon seeing Harry.

"Mr. Potter, Headmaster Dumbledore has requested to speak with you."

Harry perked up. "I see." He looked at his friends.

"Go on, Harry," Susan said. "We'll meet you in the All House Common Room."

"Thanks."

After everyone said their goodbyes—all except for Daphne who'd decided to come with him—Harry followed Professor Lupin to Headmaster Dumbledore's office. After the usual matter of the headmaster telling them to enter before Professor Lupin could even knock, the group went inside. The headmaster was sitting behind his desk when they entered.

"I have to get back to my duties," Professor Lupin said. "Take care, you two."

"You as well, professor," Harry said.

"Mr. Potter... and Ms. Greengrass. I did not expect to see you here."

"I wanted to be with Harry," Daphne said by way of explanation.

"Indeed." Headmaster Dumbledore gained an amused twinkle in his eyes. "Well, I shall not stop you from being with him. You may stay, if that is your wish." Daphne nodded in gratitude, but she didn't say anything, prompting the headmaster to continue. "Now, then, Professor McGonagall has informed me that you wished to speak with me. I apologize for not getting with you sooner, but matters outside of Hogwarts have kept me busy."

It must have been the matter involving Sirius Black, Harry determined. Even with the press conference, there was still a lot that needed to be done. Undoubtedly, Headmaster Dumbledore was helping to manage the situation with his powers as the Supreme Mugwump of the Wizengamot.

"It is fine. I know you're busy." Coughing into his hand, Harry got started. "I... was hoping you'd be willing to let the goblins temporarily into Hogwarts."

Whatever the headmaster must have been expecting, that did not appear to be it. There was a single moment where Headmaster Dumbledore's eyes nearly popped. Even his half-moon spectacles almost fell off, as if it was experience the shock of its owner.

"Pardon?" he asked.

"I have a basilisk carcass that I would like to break down into saleable parts," Harry continued. "My hope was to sell it as ingredients for potions and quality clothier material. The goblins have already found several people willing to buy off the parts, but they cannot harvest them without your permission."

Headmaster Dumbledore remained silent for a time. Harry could almost see the cogs turning inside of his head. The man, renowned for his vast knowledge and wisdom, was following his string of words and coming to the most likely conclusion.

"You are referring to the basilisk located within the Chamber of Secrets, aren't you?"

It didn't surprise Harry that Headmaster Dumbledore had come to such a conclusion. He would've arrived at the same one, had their positions been reversed.

"Yes."

The headmaster nodded. "Before I give you my answer, will you take me down to the Chamber of Secrets?"

Harry had known this was coming, and he'd already come up with his

answer. "Yes."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Dumbledore slapped his knees and stood up. There was a smile on his face. He looked almost like a child—a really old child—who was visiting the candy store for the first time. "Let us be off. I've always wanted to see the Chamber of Secrets for myself."

Since there were two others with him, Harry didn't use the passage in the second floor girl's bathroom, and instead chose the one nearest to the headmaster's office. It was located behind a large tapestry with the Ravenclaw crest. Behind the tapestry was a tunnel, lit not by lanterns, but glowing crystals.

"These are alchemically created crystals," Headmaster Dumbledore mused as they walked down a flight of stairs.

"You're correct," Harry said. "I made these crystals when I first began exploring and rebuilding the Chamber of Secrets."

"Fascinating," Headmaster Dumbledore murmured. "If I'm not mistaken, to make crystals capable of emitting light like this, you must first create a crystallized container using the Three Essential Principles."

"That's right." Harry said, helping Daphne step down a loose stone step. "After that, I added a minor rune to them, which allow the crystals to draw in magic from their surroundings, or rather, from the emissions that are constantly being released by the students."

"An ingenious method," Headmaster Dumbledore praised.

Daphne, still holding his hand, sent him a sidelong glance. "Just how far ahead of everyone else are you?"

"That would depend on the subject," Harry admitted.

She sighed. "I should have expected as much. You never do things half-assed, do you?"

He smiled. "You know me too well."

The stairs ended, the narrow passage expanding into a cavernous room. A door stood before them. Copper glimmered dully in the light from dozens of crystals. Stained in rust, much of the original color had faded. Harry could just barely make out the snake motifs along the door.

"Open," Harry hissed in parseltongue. Creaking echoed around the chamber, a slow groan like the turning of rusted wheels. Slowly, the doors split apart, opening wide to reveal a tunnel.

"I see," Headmaster Dumbledore said, more to himself than to Harry, it seemed. "So the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets can only be opened by Parseltongue. That explains why no one aside from Voldemort had been able to open it."

"The Dark Lord has opened the Chamber of Secrets?" Daphne asked before Harry could.

"Indeed, Ms. Greengrass. Voldemort was once a student attending Hogwarts. Of course, he did not go by that title back then. Voldemort is but a mere pseudonym. His original name is Tom Riddle."

Harry clenched his fists. He remembered that name. It was the name of the person who'd killed Hermione, the one who had tried to kill him with the basilisk. The diary in his possession had once housed the soul known as Tom Riddle. He'd not realized that Tom and Voldemort were one and the same.

How foolish I was not to see it...

Now that he knew this, his direction was clear. Voldemort had always been his enemy, but now he was the person that Harry would strike down without mercy.

Come hell or high water, Voldemort would die by his hands.

XoX

Headmaster Dumbledore had signed a contract giving the goblins permission to enter Hogwarts. He'd also told Harry that since the Chamber of Secrets could only be opened by him, that he would let Harry

use it as he saw fit. Harry thought the headmaster was being awfully accommodating, but he didn't question the man's decision. How could he when it ended with him getting what he wanted?

Harry had sent a letter to the goblins along with the contract. It was a magically binding contract that would become effective once Ragnok signed it in blood. He didn't know how long it would take for the goblins to get a team together, but given the nature of the issue, he believed it wouldn't be long before they arrived.

It was November 18th. The 24th, the day where he and Sirius would show up together for the press conference, was only six days away, but Harry felt like that was far too little time. There was so much that he still needed to do. He needed to be back in perfect shape, he needed to continue working on regaining his standing among the school, he needed to finish at least one of his projects, and he needed to get that blasted basilisk carcass broken down and sold. He felt more than a little overwhelmed.

His first period of the day was Potions. As per the usual, after Professor Snape had swept into the room and properly insulted the Gryffindors, he wrote the instructions on the board and told them to get to work.

That morning they were working on the Girding Potion, which was a concoction that temporarily gave its consumer extra endurance for about a month, give or take a few days depending on the potion's quality. Given the nature of the potion, the maximum dosage one could take was two vials. It wasn't something to be used lightly.

Harry was working alongside Daphne and Neville. Tracey and Blaise sat in front of them next to Seamus Finnigan. It was a bit odd seeing the boy there, but Professor Snape had separated him and Dean to keep the two from blowing up the potions lab.

The Girding Potion was fairly easy to make; the first step was adding one set of fairy wings, and then heating the potion until it turned turquoise. After that, they added one measure of doxy eggs and heated it until it turned pink, and then they added toasted dragonfly thoraxes until the potion turned silver before heating it until it became red. The last four

steps were to add three measures of doxy eggs, more dragonfly thoraxes, heat until it turned blue, add three flying seahorses, and then heat until it turned green. Despite being a long process, Harry, who was a fine chef, if he did say so himself, could easily replicate the instructions.

That said, Harry had a much more efficient way of making the Girding Potion.

"Don't heat the potion after adding in the fairy wings," Harry said to Daphne.

She nodded, and Harry took out two measures of droxy eggs, crushed them, and added them into the potion before stirring clockwise and then counterclockwise three times. The potion turned red.

"Okay. Now add some dragonfly thoraxes. I'll tell you when to stop."

Doing as he instructed, Daphne asked, "how does skipping the first few steps help hasten the potion making process?"

"The first heating process doesn't actually do anything," Harry said. "The turning of green is simply a sign to indicate that the fairy wings have properly blended into the potion, but it's not a necessary step. Also, the doxy eggs aren't there to do anything other than help the dragonfly thoraxes and fairy wings properly mix. If we stir the potion, we can mix the two without needing that extra step, and then if we add twice the amount of doxy eggs in the next step, we can hasten the process. Not only will we cut our potion making time in half, but the effects of the potion will last two weeks longer."

"Is that because of how the doxy eggs are involatile?"

"Partly, but it's also because of how they interact with the other two ingredients," Harry said.

"I see."

Girding Potion took an hour to brew if one followed the instructions. Harry's method cut down the time by half, and long before the class was over, he and Daphne were bottling up their potion and delivering it to

Professor Snape.

The potions professor looked them over with his usual scowl. He didn't look at all pleased, but because Daphne was in Slytherin, he couldn't act overtly mean to Harry without proving his biased. Even if he did, he knew that Harry would call him out for it.

"Done with your potion already?" Professor Snape sneered. "I see you've used another cheat to get your work done faster. I expected as much from you, Potter, though I am disappointed to see Ms. Greengrass following your example."

Harry's smile was so wide he could feel his eyes closing. "I prefer to call it working efficiently myself, and I'd ask that you not bring Daphne into this. Otherwise, I might have to contact her father and inform him about the illegitimate accusations you're throwing at her."

It was a bluff, of course. If he contacted Daphne's father, the one who'd get in trouble wouldn't be Professor Snape. He wasn't going to let the onary potions professor know that, however.

A red vein throbbed on Professor Snape's forehead. Taking a deep breath, the man visibly forced himself to remain in control. "Turn in your potions and move along. You're holding up the class."

"Done and done."

Harry and Daphne handed over their potions. Harry's had an unbreakable charm on the bottle so the professor couldn't sabotage it. They walked back over to their seat and sat down. Since they were finished, there wasn't much they could do. All of their homework was already done. He sighed.

This is one of those times where I really wish I could work on my projects...

"Are you feeling all right?" Daphne asked, leaning over and whispering into his ear.

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"I didn't want to say anything," she began, "but you've been looking kind of distracted lately. I thought you might be having trouble with something."

Harry smiled. "It's nothing serious. I just feel a little overwhelmed."

"With the Sirius issue?"

"With a whole bunch issues."

It all came back to how much work he needed to do. While he did have an entire year to get everything done, Harry wanted to finish most of his tasks now. That way he could get started on new projects.

Daphne nodded. "I imagine it's rough adding so many tasks to your plate. But you know, if Susan were here, she'd tell you that you should shelf some of your projects and relax a little more."

"She would say that, wouldn't she?"

Susan had become quite the mother hen. Every day she made sure he was eating right. When he wasn't eat what she deemed to be enough, she'd give him more food. In class, she asked him if there was anything she could to do help and did her best to make sure he never needed for anything. During study sessions, she stuck close, asking him questions on their homework or asking whether he needed help with his projects.

Harry had politely declined her help on his projects, not because he didn't want it, but because his projects were generally things only he could do. What's more, most of them could be dangerous. This was especially true if someone who didn't know what he was doing tried to help. Alchemy was not something that most people at Hogwarts studied.

"She would," Daphne agreed. "And I tend to agree with her." She placed a hand on his thigh. "You should relax a little more. If you keep going like this, you're going to burn yourself out."

Sighing, Harry said, "Maybe you're right. I just... don't like the idea of stopping any of my projects. It feels unproductive."

Daphne's answering grin made him feel embarrassed. "Ambition is good, but it's not good to over extend yourself. As a Slytherin, it may be wrong of me to say this, but you could stand to be a little less ambitious."

He sighed again. Even so, he still agreed to shelf at least one or two of his projects for now.

There was just no winning against women.

XoX

Two days after Harry sent the goblins a missive informing them of the headmaster's permission, Hogwarts received several guests. They arrived during lunch. A somewhat flustered Professor McGonagall and an amused Professor Lupin had come to retrieve him. Harry had asked his friends if they wanted to come with, but only Daphne, Neville, and Susan agreed.

Thus the four of them went to the headmaster's office, where several goblins, an unfamiliar human, and Director Ragnok himself waited.

"I had not expected to see you, Director," Harry said in surprise.

"I normally do not come to such expeditions, but I wished to see the basilisk for myself," Director Ragnok shamelessly admitted. "A basilisk is difficult for even a dozen armed goblins to slay. For one so young to slay a creature like that by himself is a remarkable feat."

In other words, Director Ragnok wanted to verify his claims. Of course, the director likely did not suspect a lie. Indeed, lying to someone like him was foolish. However, to lay sight on such an accomplishment with his own eyes was too good an opportunity to pass up, especially for the battle loving goblins, who, thanks to the treaty, could no longer make war.

"Allow me to introduce the team charged with extracting parts from the basilisk," the director continued with a sweeping gestures. "These three are Hardback, Shieldbreaker, and Shankhook. The human is Bill Weasley, one of our curse breakers."

The three goblins looked quite different from each other—at least to Harry.

While their skin was mostly the same color, they had distinct differences in facial appearance. One bore a scar across his eye, the other had some of his ear missing, and the last appeared younger, with a face that had less wrinkles.

"You're the Weasley twins brother, I'm guessing," Harry said.

"That's right." Bill grinned. "What gave it away. It's the hair, isn't it?"

It was true that Bill looked eerily similar to his brothers. His hair was flame-colored and his face had the same white pallor as his brothers. Yet his general disposition, the way he carried himself, was vastly different. If the Weasley twins looked like pranksters, then this man looked like an adventurer. Decked in leather chaps, adorned with a leather trench coat, and wearing a dragon claw earring, he was the definition of what most kids Harry's age would have called cool.

"The hair was part of it," Harry allowed.

"I think the fact that Director Ragnok called you 'Weasley' was a bigger indicator, though," Daphne said dryly.

Bill scratched the back of his head. "I guess so. Your girlfriend has a sharp mouth on her."

Harry decided not to correct the man's mistake. Instead, he turned to Director Ragnok. He raised an eyebrow, which the director correctly interpreted as a question.

"Bill Weasley is here to inspect the infrastructure. The basilisk parts will be large, especially if it's as big as you say. Moving it all will be difficult, and the Chamber of Secrets is thousands of years old. We'd rather not deal with it collapsing on us."

Curse breakers went into ancient ruins all the time as part of their job. Dealing with traps, unstable constructions, and various magical issues, they were well-suited to studying the infrastructure of the Chamber of Secrets.

"I understand." Harry nodded and turned to Professors Lupin and

McGonagall. "Would you two like to see the basilisk as well?"

"I believe I shall remain here," Professor McGonagall stated. "I'd rather not see the results of your mischief."

"I'm going," Professor Lupin said, smiling. "I wasn't there to see your accomplishment, but I'd like to at least catch a glimpse of the basilisk before it's excavated for parts."

"I can't believe I'm going down to see that thing again," Neville muttered to himself.

Daphne smirked. "You're the one who decided to follow Harry."

"Thanks for reminding me." Neville grimaced. "What was I thinking?"

They took the same route that Harry had when showing Headmaster Dumbledore the Chamber of Secrets. Bill and those unaware that he was a parselmouth received a shock when he spoke the password for the door. When they arrived, Harry took a moment to look upon the others; he amused himself with the shocked faces of his companions. Professor Lupin looked like he might die from a heart attack, and even Director Ragnok's jaw had practically fallen to the floor as he gazed upon the basilisk corpse.

"What a magnificent beast," the director murmured. "It truly is around twenty meters in length. And you brought this thing down alone?"

"Yes," Harry answered.

The gleam in Director Ragnok's eyes lasted but a second. Even so, it was long enough for Harry to notice it.

"Men! I want you to begin working immediately! Let us emerge from this endeavor with profit!"

As the goblins and Bill Weasley went to work, Professor Lupin stood next to Harry, Daphne, and Neville, his widened eyes locked on the massive carcass.

"I cannot believe you killed something like this on your own," he admitted.

"It was a near thing," Harry agreed. "I nearly died several times."

He did not mention the mysterious appearance of the strange Phoenix with white and blue feathers. That was a mystery he could not solve, and it would do no good to let others know about it until he had solved it. Still, that bird had been strange, familiar almost. Harry felt like he should know it...

Yet the only phoenix I know is Fawkes.

"I'm still shocked every time I see it," Neville admitted.

"It is an amazing sight," Daphne agreed, her hand reaching for Harry's almost sub-consciously. The feeling of her fingers curling around his hand was comfortably familiar.

One of the goblins came up to Ragnok and barked something in Gobbledygook. Harry frowned. He could make out some of the words, but he was still not fluent in Gobbledygook, though he could use logic to piece together the parts he didn't understand. It sounded like the goblin, who he recognized as Shieldbreaker by the missing ear, was giving Director Ragnok an estimation of how much time it would take. The director nodded several times. Then he barked out some orders. Shieldbreaker nodded and went back toward the basilisk.

"It looks like rendering this down into saleable parts will take several weeks," Director Ragnok said. "You can expect us to be done sometime in December. The skinning process will take the longest, but there are also a lot of ingredients to be gathered." He looked back at the giant corpse. "I'm not surprised. This is... bigger than I had expected."

"Your people can stay within Hogwarts until their task is done," Headmaster Dumbledore said. "I understand how long a process like this is. Let us know if your people need anything."

"The goblins will be fine staying down here," Director Ragnok said. "Bill Weasley's task shouldn't take more than a day. That said, my men will need provisions. I assume your house elves know what goblins like to

eat?"

"Indeed they do," the headmaster said. "I shall inform them to prepare your meals. Just let me know what times they would like them, and we can bring them down here."

"Then it sounds like we have an agreement," Director Ragnok said with a vicious-looking grin.

Neville shuddered. "I've never seen a goblin smile before."

"It is kind of creepy," Harry said. "But you'll get used to it eventually."

"I'm not sure I want to get used to it."

"That makes two of us," Daphne muttered, scooting a little closer to Harry as though doing so would keep her from seeing the director's smile.

XoX

November 23rd was the day before Harry and Sirius were to show up at the Ministry of Magic for a press conference. Since Harry needed to meet up with Sirius, Headmaster Dumbledore had allowed him to leave school early. He'd been escorted out of Hogwarts by Professor Lupin, and together they had apparated all the way to London, where they would meet Sirius at his home.

As they walked down the streets of London, Harry glanced at Professor Lupin. Once more, the professor seemed to have aged several years. His haggard appearance was rougher than before, he walked with a noticeable stoop, and his eyes had large bags under them.

"Are feeling well, Professor?"

"Huh? Oh, yes." Professor Lupin cast him an unconvincing smile. "I'm fine. I'm just a little tired from staying up late grading papers."

"Is that so?" Harry acted nonchalant as he said, "then you're not feeling under the weather because of your lycanthropy?"

Professor Lupin stumbled. He would've fallen on his face, but he caught himself at the last second. Turning to face Harry, he stared at him with a gaping look.

"Y-you knew?"

"Of course I knew," Harry said. "I've known about your lycanthropy for a long time now."

He didn't tell Professor Lupin that he'd known since he was several months old. That would have sounded weird, and the professor didn't need to know that much anyway. What was more important was letting the professor know that he knew.

"Does it bother you?" Professor Lupin asked hesitantly.

"What? That you're a werewolf?" Harry scoffed. "No. Why should it?"

"Werewolves are dangerous."

"So is a man with a gun."

"That's... a fair point, but it's not really the same."

"Why not?" Harry asked. "You can kill people in your werewolf form? Well, a man with a submachine gun can kill people, too. Actually, someone with a submachine gun can kill more people than you can as a werewolf."

"That may be true, but those people aren't cursed like I am." Professor Lupin frowned as he looked at his hands. "Even if someone survived after I attacked them, they'd never be the same. Lycanthropy is a curse that's spread through our very blood. Even being attacked by our claws is enough to leave you cursed."

"I'm not sure how that matters," Harry said.

"It matters because once someone is infected, they can never go back to being human. They're stuck forever as one of us, one of those who've been damned. It's not something that I would wish on anyone."

Thanks to his lack of success in getting Professor Lupin out of his funk, Harry needed a moment to arrange what he wanted to say. This man might have been even worse than him in the self-pity department.

"Well, you might care about something as dumb as a curse," Harry said. "But I don't think it really matters. It's not like getting a little furry once in a full moon changes who you are as a person."

Finally, Professor Lupin smiled. "You know, your mum told me the same thing."

"Is that so? My mom was a smart woman, then," Harry said.

"Indeed she was. Smartest woman I've ever met."

Grimmauld place was their destination. Professor Lupin had already been given the secret by Harry. They walked up to the somewhat imposing building, which looked as creepy as ever, and knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" a voice called out.

"It's Harry and Moony," Professor Lupin said.

"Sorry," the voice called again, "but I don't know hairy mooners."

Professor Lupin's lips twitched. "Come off it, you old dog. Let us in."

The door opened to reveal a grinning Sirius. "Welcome. Welcome, you two, to my humble abode. Step this way, and do be mindful of the carpet. It was freshly cleaned this morning."

Harry and Professor Lupin entered the hallway, and as he did, Harry's feet partially sank into the floor. He looked down. The carpet appeared new. Clean and soft, its color was no longer faded with age. Harry wondered if this was the result of magic, or if it had been replaced.

The portrait of Walburga still hung from the wall. It wasn't covered. The painting watched as the two walked in, frowning almost imperceptibly.

"Follow me into the kitchen," Sirius said, gesturing for them as he wandered down the hall.

Much like the hallway, the kitchen appeared as if brand new. The floor sparkled, new appliances sat on the shelves, and the counters and cabinets were different than before, newer. They sat around the table in the center of the room, which Harry also didn't remember. Sparkling and glossy, it looked as though Sirius had replaced the old table as well. Food appeared before them, sandwiches filled with various deli meats. Kreacher's work, no doubt.

"It looks like you've been doing well for yourself," Harry said. "I see you've redecorated."

Sirius's grin could have split his face in half. "I've not only redecorated. I've completely remodeled the entire house. Expansion charms, more rooms, new appliances and furniture, the works. I figured if I'm going to live here, I might as well make it a comfortable place to live."

"Indeed."

"So..." Sirius leaned forward and gave Professor Lupin a grin. "How's life as a professor?"

Professor Lupin smiled as he sipped some tea. "It's pleasant. Most of the students are good kids, and I find that I enjoy teaching."

"You always were an excellent student," Sirius admitted with a rueful grin. "You were also pretty patient with James and my antics."

"I had to be. You two were always getting us into trouble."

"As if you didn't cause your own mischief."

Watching the two trade barbs back and forth, Harry wondered if that was how they acted when they were younger. Perhaps it was his own thoughts that lead him to believing so. However, as he looked at the pair as they traded good-natured barbs, he could've sworn the two de-aged a bit. Maybe being reunited like this made them feel younger. He'd read that people often appear that way when they're reminiscing about old

times.

Since the two were busy catching up, Harry focused on the plan tomorrow. He and Sirius would head off to the Ministry early in the morning. Madam Bones would be waiting for them. She and a group of aurors would then escort them to the press conference, Harry would then inform everyone about the "truth" behind his disappearance, and then Minister Fudge would announce how the Ministry would give Sirius reparations for wrongly accusing him of a crime he didn't commit.

"By the way, Harry," Sirius interrupted his thoughts.

"What is it?"

"I heard that you and Ms. Greengrass have become awfully close." Sirius sniffed and wiped a fake tear from his eyes. "Ah, my godson is becoming a player in the field just like me."

Harry twitched.

Sirius was so getting itching powder in his bed tonight.

XoX

Early the next morning, Harry and Sirius left Grimmauld Place and traveled to the Ministry of Magic. Because the floo network was not connected to his residence, they had to travel via cab. They could have apparated there. However, apparition within the atrium was illegal.

To that end, Harry and Sirius took the train at King's Cross. Then they traveled all the way to Parliament Street, just before the entrance into Westminster Underground Station. There was a telephone booth by the entrance. Harry and Sirius entered the booth, and then Sirius typed in the numbers 62442. The telephone booth shuddered, and then it descended.

And the mundane folks don't even notice. This thing must be covered in enchantments.

The lift/booth continued to descend, and as it did, the front shifted into a glass panel that revealed the Atrium in it's entirety. Having already seen

the Atrium, Harry didn't pay much attention to the architecture. He studied the faces below. Madam Bones stood in the nearly empty interior, a squadron of aurors standing at the ready behind her. There were 13 including Madam Bones herself.

A magically strong number. Madam Bones has a sense of humor.

Flanking Madam Bones was Nymphadora Tonks, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Alastor Mad-eye Moody. It was quite the welcome.

The lift reached the bottom and the doors opened with a chime. Harry stepped out, followed by a jauntily grinning Sirius Black.

"Good morning, Amelia!" Sirius greeted the woman exuberantly. "You are looking positively stunning today. Is that a new haircut? No. Wait. Don't tell me. Your monocle has been freshly polished."

While Nymphadora Tonks snorted, Madam Bones cast him a dry look, even as she pocketed her monocle. "Try to act with a bit more decorum, Black. I know that is difficult for a rascal such as yourself, but this is a serious moment."

"Aye! Sirius it is indeed."

Harry gave Madam Bones a frustrated look. "Please don't mention serious anywhere around Sirius."

"I apologize." Madam Bones was chagrined. "It seems I let the seriousness of the moment get to me."

"Well, I think we could all stand to be a little more Sirius," Sirius said.

Harry and Madam Bones both sighed. Behind her, Kingsley nudged Tonks, who was stifling her giggles by shoving a fist into her mouth.

"Just follow me," Madam Bones muttered.

As one, the group marched off, with Madam Bones in the lead and Harry and Sirius following her. Their auror escort moved in a guard formation, with two on either side and two in the back. The rest were spread out at

exactly two meters from them.

Press conferences took place in another atrium located on the first floor. To reach it, Madam Bones lead them through several long corridors. It almost felt like they were leaving the Ministry entirely. However, they eventually reached a small door, which Madam Bones lead them through.

Harry looked around, blinking several times until his eyes adjusted to the low lighting. His feet tapped against the wooden floor. There were no furnishings in this room, save the large curtain several meters away. Light spilled in through the curtain.

His ears perked as the sound of talking reached them. The ground vibrated beneath his feet from hundreds, maybe even thousands, of footsteps. It sounded like there were already a lot of people already filling up the stands.

"Where's the Minister?" asked Harry.

"He should be here any moment now," Madam Bones assured. "You were a little early." She swished her wand and created a patronus. "Go inform Minister Fudge that Harry Potter and Sirius Black are in the press conference auditorium."

The wispy patronus, which had taken on the form of a tiger, nodded and leapt away. Harry watched as it disappeared. He was frowning.

Patronus charms can also be used to deliver messages, it seems. I really must learn how to create one.

"So, what do we do now?" asked Sirius.

Madam Bones raised an eyebrow. "Now? The stands are still filling with people and the Minister has yet to arrive. All we can do is wait."

"How boring," Sirius mumbled. He glanced around at the aurors. Harry almost groaned when the man's eyes landed on Tonks. The disturbing gleam that appeared did not bode well.

I can already tell... this is going to be troublesome.

"Cousin!" Sirius suddenly shouted, making everyone jump, and none more so than Tonks.

"Wait a second. Are you just now noticing that I'm here?" asked Tonks after she had calmed down. Her hair was turning pink.

"I was kinda busy enjoying my newfound freedom," Sirius explained. "But wow! Look at you. You've grown so much since the last time I saw you. Why, I remember when you were this little brat who used to sit on my knee and asked me to call you Nymphie."

Harry covered his laugh with a cough as Tonks's face went beet red. It was even more impressive because, thanks to her metamorph powers, the color was deeper than what could have been accomplished with a simple blush. The laughter of her coworkers probably didn't help.

"Don't call me that!" Tonks ground out.

From the grin on Sirius's face, it was clear to all that he had no intention of stopping. "Why not? I think Nymphie is a cute name. Nymphie, Nymphonia, Nymphette... Nym—"

"That's enough out of you!" Tonks made the mistake of lunging at Sirius, who, thanks to Harry's potions, was a lot stronger than he looked. She only realized her mistake when Sirius had already wrapped her up in his arms. "Wait. What are you doing? Let go of me!"

"Give me a hug!"

"I don't want a hug! I want you to let go!"

"That's no way to talk to your uncle. Aren't I your favorite uncle?"

"You're my only uncle! Now get the frack off of me!"

"Would you two calm down!" Madam Bones snapped. "Tonks! Get back in position! Black! Stop harassing my auror!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Sirius said, snapping a sloppy salute.

Quiet settled on the group again, but not for long. Voices from beyond the door they had entered from made Harry's ears prick. He recognized the voice of Minister Fudge, though the man was too far away for him to hear. As he channeled energy into his ear, the volume became louder and more distinct.

"I apologize, but this was Amelia's idea. And it's already started. I cannot go back on this."

"I would urge you to reconsider, Minister. Black is a criminal," said a voice that Harry had only heard a few times before. It was Lucius Malfoy.

"We have information that proves otherwise," Minister Fudge said. "What's more, if we were to charge Black, then I'd have to charge everyone who got out of having a trial because they claimed to be under the Imperius Curse. And if I didn't do that, then Amelia would."

The door opened and in stepped two people. One was a portly man, short and stout, wearing a lime green bowler cap. The other stood tall, his proud stance masking his arrogance, which he wore like a veil. Lucius Malfoy. The blond-haired, blue-eyed father of Draco, and a man who stood as one of Harry's biggest obstacles.

Lucius paused when his eyes landed on Harry. He seemed surprised, and Harry realized that Madam Bones must have kept quiet about him being there. To his reluctant admiration, Lucius recovered quickly.

"Harry Potter," he greeted with false courtesy. "I had not expected to see you here."

"I'm rather surprised myself," Harry said, returning the condescending courtesy with a smile that hid his malice. "However, since my godfather is the one being acquitted, I thought it would be for the best that I attend."

"Indeed."

Harry didn't need to be a genius to know what was going on through Lucius's mind. The man was undoubtedly determining what his best course of action was; should he stay and continue trying to convince Minister Fudge not to let Sirius go free, or should he concede this victory

to Harry? No doubt he was reciting the pros and cons of both. That was what Harry would have been doing.

"Minister, I believe I shall take my leave," Lucius said finally. "Potter. It was nice seeing you. Black... I hope you enjoy your freedom."

"Oh, don't worry, Lucy, I plan to." Sirius wore an insufferable grin that made Lucius twitch. Harry was impressed that the man's smile hadn't broken.

Lucius left without another word. Minister Fudge, who'd been nervously wringing his hands together, suddenly brightened once the oppressive atmosphere between Harry and Lucius had vanished.

"Harry, my boy! It's good to see you. Amelia didn't tell me you were gonna be here, but I guess I should have expected as much. Excited to see your godfather finally becoming a free man, eh?"

"Just so, Minister Fudge," Harry said, shaking the man's hand.

"And... Sirius Black. It's, uh, good to see you."

It was funny to see the nervous sweat trickling down Minister Fudge's temple as he shook Sirius's hand. He was clearly still afraid of the man. Harry guessed it was hard to be friendly to someone who was accused of murder, however wrongful it may have been.

If Sirius recognize this, he didn't show it. He grinned as he pumped the minister's hand with vigor. "Good to see you as well, Minister. Been awhile since our last meeting, eh?"

"I-indeed. Indeed. Oh! Would you look at the time. I think it's about time for me to go on stage and begin the press conference. If you'll excuse me."

Harry held his tongue as Minister Fudge used the press conference as an excuse to get away from Sirius. It was a lie, and from the grin his godfather wore, Sirius was aware of that.

Madam Bones stepped in. "I do believe we have about five more minutes

before the press conference begins. Saying that, Minister Fudge, I would like to go over some of the finer details with you."

"Of course. Of course."

Leaning over to Harry, Sirius whispered. "I think he's afraid of me."

"Minister Fudge fears a lot of things," Harry whispered back. "You're just particularly high on that list."

"Good to know."

Fifteen minutes passed with relatively little conversation. Harry studied the aurors. Many of them were shuffling their feet, and a few would look at either him or Sirius, and then look away. It was almost like they were nervous.

Well, one of us is famous and the other is infamous. I guess that would make anyone not used to being around celebrities nervous.

If there was a downside to being considered a wizarding celebrity, it was that few people could be themselves around him. It made holding a normal conversation with anyone difficult.

A plain man in a dark robe and with a basketball-shaped head rushed in from the stage. He went up to Madam Bones and Minister Fudge. Harry felt his lips twitching into a frown as he listened to the conversation.

"We're all ready for the press conference," he said.

"Good. Good." Was Minister Fudge's jovial explanation. "Well, let's get this show on the road, shall we?"

"You two wait here until we call for you," Madam Bones said to him and Sirius.

She and Minister Fudge walked onto the stage, and Harry decided that whatever they had to say didn't matter to him until they called. Even though he could hear the minister begin speaking, he did his best to tune the voice out.

"Are you nervous?" he asked Sirius.

The man scoffed. "Me? Nervous? Of course not. Why would I be?"

"Your legs are shaking." Harry pointed to Sirius's legs, which were indeed shaking. In fact, it was the kind of shaking often found in people who were stuck in freezing cold weather.

"So I've never been in front of a crowd like this before. Sue me," Sirius grumbled.

Harry grinned. "To think the infamous Sirius Black, mass prankster of Hogwarts, is afraid of standing in front of a crowd. You're not even going to speak, you know. I am."

"Bite me."

"I think the only person here who would bite another human being is you."

Sirius mumbled something about "smart alecky godsons," but before Harry could respond with something equally witty, he heard his and Sirius's name being called up.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

Sirius took a deep breath. "As ready as I'll ever be."

"Then let's go."

As Harry walked onto the stage with Sirius, he felt a smile cross his face. He could feel it in his bones. This was going to be one of those moments where he'd get to shine. This speech would be his first big public speaking platform that would push his name to even greater heights.

Watch me, mum, dad. I'm going to make you proud.

Harry seems to be getting back to his old tricks, though I think he's beginning to become a little more well rounded. I'm glad that I no

longer have to write emo Harry. To be honest, that was probably the hardest form of writing I've done.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter. I'm working on chapter 13 now. With luck, I'll it out in a week or two.

Daunting

Chapter 13

Daunting

The press conference had gone well. After getting up on stage, Harry and Sirius had listened as Minister Fudge pontificated, telling everyone that Sirius was innocent and apologizing on behalf of the Ministry of Magic. He had then stated that the Ministry, due to their own error in judgement, would make reparations to Sirius.

One-million galleons had been gifted to Sirius for over a decade of unlawful confinement. It was a hefty sum. Indeed, one-million galleons was more than most minor noble houses possessed.

According to Amelia, those galleons didn't come from the Ministry coffers, but from the personal bank of Minister Bagnold. Amelia had said that this money came from the "donations" that Lucius and several Death Eaters had given the former minister to get out of having a trial.

Death Eaters...

They were still the largest problem. There were numerous Death Eaters who'd been able to get out of being sent to Azkaban. They'd done so by claiming to have been under the Imperius curse. Several hundred thousand galleons donated to "repair the damage done by the dark lord" had kept them from being questioned under veritaserum.

Harry wanted to see them all put where they belong: In a prison surrounded by dementors.

Harry returned to school the next day with Professor Lupin, who insisted that Harry call him Moony when they were not in class. It felt a little weird calling the professor by his nickname. However, for the sake of being friendly with his parents' friend, he spoke informally despite his own feelings.

He and the defense professor walked down the hall. Their footsteps echoed along the stone ground. Harry glanced at Professor Lupin, whose haggard appearance worried Harry a bit. The man was walking with a slouched posture. Dark bags hung under his bloodshot eyes. He looked like a drug addicted going through withdrawals.

"Are you feeling all right?" Harry asked.

"I'm fine," Professor Lupin assured him.

They made it to the Great Hall, where Professor Lupin stopped and turned to him.

"Well, this is where I leave you for now," Professor Lupin said. "Have a good day, Harry."

"You too... Moony," Harry said.

Professor Lupin smiled before he turned around and left. Harry watched him for but a second, and then he turned around and entered the Great Hall. Perhaps it was due to the time—late morning—but there were already a lot of people gathered around the tables. The moment he walked in, numerous heads swiveled in his direction. He sighed as he realized that he had missed his chance to eat breakfast unnoticed.

Here it comes...

Harry sought out his friends; he spotted them sitting at the Slytherin table that morning. He made a beeline for them. While he walked, he was forced to listen to the conversations that sprang up, spoken in whispered tones. As always, it seemed his peers were interested in the circumstances surrounding him.

"Did you read about the press conference?"

"He spent the summer with Sirius Black."

"Sirius Black is innocent."

"You don't know that. Harry could have been brainwashed."

"But the Ministry of Magic said..."

"You can't believe everything the Ministry says."

Harry remained quiet, not saying anything as he reached his friends. Daphne and Susan, who sat next to each other, immediately split apart, making room for him between them. Harry blinked at the strange action, but he still sat down. The moment his butt was parked, they closed in, sandwiching him between them.

"Morning, everyone," Harry greeted, eying the two girls warily. He wasn't really uncomfortable with their proximity—Lisa often sat this close—but he did have to wonder what they were thinking.

He received a chorus of good mornings from everyone before Daphne said, "We saw the newspaper this morning."

"Congratulations on helping your godfather get his freedom," Susan added with a kind smile.

Harry smiled back. "Thanks."

"What's going to happen now that your godfather is free?" asked Blaize. "Do you have any plans?"

As he spooned some grits onto his plate, Harry frowned thoughtfully as he thought about Blaize's question. "To be honest, I'm not sure about everything yet. I know that I'm going to live with Sirius, but I don't know anything outside of that. Everything's happening so fast that I can't make any concrete plans right now."

The problem with trying to make a solid plan of action was that there was too much going on. There were currently far too many variables. When so much was happening all within the same time span, creating a course of action was impossible, since the variables were liable to change at random based on the actions of others. Right now, people like Lucius, Sirius, Minister Fudge, and even Madam Bones were hard at work on their own agendas. Since Harry didn't know what those agendas were, all he could do was react to what they did.

"I bet it'll be fun to live with your godfather, though, right?" Tracey said.

"I guess," Harry admitted with a shrug.

He didn't want to say anything, because he didn't want his friends thinking he was a pansy, but he was nervous about living with Sirius. What if they didn't get along? What if he had a relapse? What if something happened and Sirius suddenly died? So many things could go wrong, and Harry was afraid of not being able to do anything when the time came.

"You don't sound very enthusiastic," Hannah said.

Harry smiled, but he believed it was more of a grimace. "I'm just nervous."

"What's this? The great Harry Potter is nervous?" Tracey teased.

Harry shrugged. "Even I get nervous."

"Don't worry about being nervous," Susan said, her tone supportive. "All of us are here to help you, so if you ever need anything, be sure to rely on us."

Harry smiled. "Thanks, Susan."

Since it was Monday, Harry's first class of the day was Care of Magical Creatures with Rubeus Hagrid. That day they were learning about flobberworms, which had to be the most boring lesson ever taught. Flobberworms were ten-inch long worms that fed on lettuce. Since they didn't do anything, Harry and the others spent much of their time talking while their flobberworms just laid around and did, well, nothing. A few died because some of the students overfed them, but most survived since everyone was too focused on chatting to pay much attention.

Study of Ancient Runes was next. Their last class had them working on recreating a rune based on the name of one of the Norse gods. Daphne had chosen Freya. Harry had decided to use Odin-All Father. In Elder Futhark, Odin's name was spelt with Othila, Dagaz, Isa, and Naudiz. Since it was a basic name, the rune didn't do much when activated. Harry

would've had to add more runes to create an array that did much more than glow with the symbolic color that represented Odin—silver. Still, he believed it was possible to make a powerful array if he played around with some more runes.

"I think I should have gone with a different name," Lisa said after class had ended. "I chose Thor because I wanted to be safe, but I feel like I didn't push myself hard enough now."

"Maybe next time you should think of doing something like Bragi or even Balder," Terry said.

Lisa frowned. "Which god did you choose?"

"Njord."

"A member of the Vanir clan who joined the Aesir as hostages after the war between their clan and the Aesir," Harry said. "I'm surprised you know about those gods."

Terry shrugged. "I'm not a mythology buff like you, but I've studied enough to know the basics."

"You chose Frigg, didn't you, Susan?" Daphne asked.

"Um, yes, that's right," Susan admitted, trying not to blush.

"Did you choose her because she's married to Odin?" Daphne continued her questioning with a teasing smile. Susan's face turned several more shades of red.

Transfiguration came after Ancient Runes. Professor McGonagall had already given them a thorough lecture on becoming an animagus, and they were finished with their one foot long papers. Their next lesson was on turning a teapot into a tortoise. Many of the students struggled with this. Even with Harry's help, only six members of the entire class came even close to making a complete transfiguration. Most could only change the color.

In Potions, Professor Snape's scowl had been even more prominent than

usual. He'd spoken in a harsh tone that made many a Gryffindor cringe. Unlike most of the time where the professor told them to "follow the instructions on the board," this time he had stalked around the room, watching them like a venomous snake looking for a weakness in its prey. The moment someone made an error, he'd snap at them, calling them incompetent fools and giving them an automatic failing grade for the lesson. Naturally, he only did this with the Gryffindors.

Harry had the distinct feeling that Professor Snape had been ignoring him and his friends during class. The man refused to look at them, refused to talk to them, and he even refused to speak when they'd gone to hand in their project. The only thing the professor had done that seemed natural was to scowl at Harry when he turned his project in. Even then, he had still said nothing.

Most of the students had still been working on their Girding Potion. Many of them hadn't been able to complete it last class, so they'd been forced to redo it. Since he and his friends were finished, they didn't have any work. They would've been forced to quietly sit there, but they decided to chat by passing notes back and forth. Professor Snape's scowl had deepened, but even then, he didn't say anything to them.

When the class ended, Professor Snape told them to pack up and left. Harry followed the man with his eyes as he walked toward the door and slammed it shut behind him.

"He's in an awfully big hurry," Tracey said. "I wonder why."

Daphne shrugged as she put her potions equipment away. "Maybe he forgot to grab ingredients for his next class from the storeroom."

"Maybe," Tracey sounded dubious.

Harry was also curious, but he honestly didn't care enough to question what the man was doing. He silently packed away his things, and then traveled with the others to their last class of the day. It wasn't until they reached the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom that Harry realized why Professor Snape had been in such a hurry.

He and the others paused when they saw the potions professor standing

in the DADA classroom. Harry and his friends looked at each other. Judging from the way their jaws had dropped, they clearly hadn't been expecting him to show up either.

"What are you simpletons waiting for? An invitation?" Professor Snape scowled at them. "Hurry up and take your seats."

With that prompting, everyone entered and took their seats. Professor Snape continued to scowl at them. Even after everyone was seated, his expression remained firmly locked.

"Werewolves," Professor Snape began, "creatures of the dark. Lycanthropy is a magical illness known to be spread by contact between saliva and blood; thus, when a transformed werewolf bites a human, the bitten will become a werewolf themselves. Can anyone tell me how to save someone after they've been bitten? Potter!"

Harry twitched at being called out. However, he still stood and answered the question. "Applying a mixture of powdered silver and dittany to a fresh bite will seal the wound and let the victim live as a werewolf. However, most witches and wizards who are bitten will often beg for death as opposed to becoming a werewolf."

Professor Snape scowled but nodded. "Potter is correct. When a witch or wizard is bitten by a werewolf, the only way to save them is by applying powdered silver and dittany. However, becoming a werewolf is a curse. A werewolf cannot choose whether or not to transform and will no longer remember who they are and would kill even their best friend given the opportunity once transformed."

Professor Snape lectured them on lycanthropy for the entire class. All the while, Harry was frowning.

They weren't supposed to learn about werewolves for another few months, according to Professor Lupin's schedule. He could only conclude that Professor Snape was doing this as an attempt to make people realize what Professor Lupin was.

Speaking of... I wonder where Professor Lupin is.

It had been a full moon the previous night, which explained why Professor Lupin had looked so haggard this morning. Harry knew that the professor had not arrived at Grimmauld place until early this morning. Professor Lupin also hadn't been able to take a Wolfsbane Potion the previous evening, which he could only assume Professor Snape was supplying him.

"Excuse me, Professor," Daphne said after Professor Snape had finished his lecture and demanded they read from the book.

"What is it, Ms. Greengrass?" Professor Snape asked.

"I apologize if this seems forward, but do you know where Professor Lupin is?"

Professor Snape's lip curled. "Professor Lupin is currently indisposed. He has not been feeling well since last night. That is why I am substituting for him. Any more questions?"

"No, sir."

"Good. Then keep reading from chapter six of your book."

Daphne clicked her tongue, but she seemed to understand that Professor Snape wouldn't answer anymore questions. She went back to her reading.

The rest of the class passed in silence. No one spoke for fear of earning the professor's ire. When class ended, Professor Snape told them they had a two foot long paper on werewolves and their weaknesses due next class.

Since it was the last class of the day, Harry split up with his friends to find Professor Lupin. Daphne decided to go with him.

"You should always have someone with you," she had said when he questioned her. Harry didn't have the heart to argue.

They searched high and low for Professor Lupin, checking the hospital, asking Professor McGonagall, and even going to see if he was with

Hagrid. It was all for naught. The professor seemed to have disappeared.

"I wish I hadn't given the Marauders Map back to the twins," Harry said with a sigh. "Finding Professor Lupin would be much easier if I could actually see where he was."

"Do you think he might be with the headmaster?" asked Daphne.

"Maybe, but we won't be able to see him if he is," Harry said. "The headmaster changes his password daily. I could probably figure it out eventually, but I doubt we'd be allowed to just enter his office whenever we pleased."

"True enough. I guess not even the Boy-Who-Lived can simply walk in on the headmaster." Daphne paused. "What should we do?"

After thinking about it for a moment, Harry sighed and said, "Let's give up for now. I'm sure Professor Lupin will be around tomorrow. I'll talk to him then."

"Sounds like a plan."

As they were wandering off to find their friends, Daphne turned to Harry. "By the way..."

"What is it?"

"You looked good in that business suit during the press conference."

Harry stopped walking as heat sprang to his face. It felt like he could have fried eggs on them. Grinning, Daphne kept walking, forcing him to eventually catch up and try to convince her that he'd only worn the suit because it made him appear more professional.

Daphne didn't believe him, no matter how logical his argument was.

XoX

Harry hadn't seen Professor Lupin in several days. In fact, no one had seen him for several days, not even the other professors. When Harry

had asked Professor McGonagall how the defense professor was doing, she told him that he was currently recovering from a magical illness. Since Harry already knew about his lycanthropy, he didn't say anything, as lycanthropy was considered an illness by many.

It was the beginning of December. The windows had become frosted over, the grass was covered in sheets of white, and the air was so cold that Harry's breath misted as he ran laps around the lake.

Because it was so cold, most of his friends had opted to stop exercising. Only Daphne, Susan, and Neville remained. His fellow Gryffindor had never missed a single morning of exercise. Every morning he woke up with Harry and headed outside. While Daphne and Susan weren't so dedicated, they still came more often than not. He would see them watching him as he worked out. They must have still been worried about him, which would also explain why there was always one of them around.

After he finished running laps around the lake, dropped to the ground and began doing push ups. The area around him was free of snow, a perfect circle of dried out grass. He was wearing an alchemy created vest to increase the difficulty of his push ups. The vest weighed about 50 kilograms.

I used to be capable of wearing something with over 100 kilograms...

It still bothered him that he wasn't as strong as he used to be, but three months of not exercising would cause anyone's muscles to atrophy. At least he was stronger now than he had been two weeks ago. He was regaining his former level of fitness, and thanks to his magic, it was happening faster than it would have with someone else. Harry imagined he'd be back in peak physical condition by the end of December.

"You about done, Harry?" Neville asked. "The girls are getting cold."

"We are not!" Daphne and Susan said at the same time.

Harry stopped doing push ups and looked up. Neville was standing by a tree, shivering in his sweater and pants. His skin was shining with frosted over sweat. Likewise, Daphne and Susan were huddled together in an attempt to keep warm.

I guess the warming charms wore off...

He stood up. "You're right. Let's get inside."

"Thank Merlin," Neville mumbled.

Rolling his eyes, Harry cast a quick warming charm on Daphne and Susan. They could've done it themselves, but neither of them had brought their wands.

"Thanks, Harry," Susan said with a smile.

He smiled back. "You're welcome."

Because it was Thursday, Harry didn't have Defense Against the Dark Arts until fourth period, after potions. Professor Lupin was standing inside of the DADA classroom when he and everyone else arrived. Although he greeted them with a smile, dark bags hung under his bloodshot eyes and he stood with a noticeable slouch. He looked like someone who'd gone on an all-night drinking binge.

"Good day, class," he said. "I was informed that Professor Snape has gone ahead and already taught you about werewolves, so today, I'm going to teach you a spell that may help you should you ever come into contact with a werewolf."

Harry frowned. As far as he knew, there was no spell that could be used to properly defend against a werewolf. All one could do when facing such a creature was use standard spells and hope their magic was strong enough to deal damage.

"It's called the freezing spell, otherwise known as *Glacius*. This spell is a powerful freezing charm that causes the air in front of your wand to reach extremely cold temperatures. Aside from being able to put out fires, create blocks of ice from water, and cool off fire salamanders, it can also be used to freeze werewolves. Can anyone tell me why?"

Harry needed a moment to get over his surprise, but then he raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"It's because werewolves are warm blooded," Harry said. "It's a proven fact that warm blooded creatures don't deal well with the cold. When humans are forced into extreme drops in temperature, our bodies become lethargic and slow. They can lead to all kinds of problems like hypothermia. Werewolves have an even harder time dealing with cold weather because of how hot their blood runs. Of course, they also have fur, which helps them deal with colder temperatures, but if you could cast a *Glacius* that's cold enough to freeze a lake, it could easily defeat a werewolf."

"An excellent and well thought out, Mr. Potter! Take ten points for Gryffindor," Professor Lupin praised. He then continued. "Now, why don't we head to another room. While I'd like you all to get some practice, I don't want this spell to freeze my classroom. Come on, everyone. Follow me."

Harry stood up with the others and followed Professor Lupin out of the classroom. He walked alongside Neville, Daphne, Blaise, and Tracey. The sound of several dozen footsteps caused his eardrums to vibrate.

"I didn't know we'd be learning how to freeze people," Tracey said excitedly. "That's so cool!"

"You didn't know about it because you never study ahead," Daphne said. "And it's not that amazing. The freezing charm has so few uses that the chances you'll actually find a use for it are close to zero."

"Don't be such a spoilsport, Daph," Tracey said.

"Indeed," Blaise added, seemingly supporting Tracey. "Let the girl have her delusions of grandeur."

"Oi!" Tracey squawked in an indignant voice.

"Daphne brings up a good point," Neville muttered. "Are we ever going to find a use for a spell like this?"

Harry shrugged. "You never know. The freezing charm can actually be

dead useful in a fight. Just imagine freezing the floor around your enemy's feet. They slip, fall to the ground, and you hit them with a spell before they can get back up. It's good for more than most people realize, but you have to think outside the box."

Tracey elbowed Daphne's side. "Hear that, Daph? This spell does have it's practical uses."

"Only if you're going to pick a fight with people," Daphne shot back.

"You already know this spell, don't you?" Blaize asked. Harry smiled but said nothing.

The classroom they were lead to appeared to have been emptied beforehand. There were no desks, tables, or chairs. The only items within the room were a series of large, metal barrels. They were several feet from each other.

"Each one of you stand in front of a barrel, please," Professor Lupin instructed. Everyone chose a barrel. Harry ended up between Tracey and Neville. "Excellent. Now, you'll notice there's some kindling inside of the barrel. Light it with an incendio, please."

All around the room, barrel's were lit up in a blaze of fire. Harry studied the interior. It was about two feet tall, and about half of it was filled with wood and kindling. He pointed his wand and fire shot from the tip, striking the kindling and lighting it ablaze.

"Good," Professor Lupin said. "And now you're all going to practice the *Glacius* spell. Remember, all you have to do is point your wand at the barrel and say *Galcius*. Does anyone have any questions? No. All right then. Give it a try."

Harry could already do this spell, so he didn't bother wasting time by pretending he couldn't or watching everyone else. He pointed the wand at the Barrel. He imagined an icy wind coming from the tip of his wand. He blinked when the barrel and the floor became frozen solid. Glittering ice like large crystal formations formed all around the barrel, which had turned into a white sleet of thick ice.

I had only meant to put out the fire.

"Well... it looks like you got the hang of the spell," Professor Lupin said. "And you did it silently, though the spell was a bit, erm, overpowered. Take five points for Gryffindor."

Harry accepted the points with a nod, but most of his attention was on the ice surrounding his barrel. This wasn't the first time his spell had been more powerful than usual. The other day, his levitation charm had caused his books to fly up to the ceiling. And a week before that, he'd cast a color changing spell during "Magic Tag." Lisa Turpin had been green for two days straight. It hadn't been happening very frequently, but at least one out of every twenty spells would be overpowered. He wasn't sure what it meant.

I may need to contact Emily Smith.

He sighed. Great. More problems. That was just what he needed.

XoX

The goblins had completed extracting parts from the basilisk. Harry received a notice early Saturday morning with a statement saying that the cost of labor was being waved due to the "generosity" of Harry's business proposal. Basically, they were agreeing to not fine him for the work since he was offering them 50 percent of the money that would be made from selling the basilisk.

When Harry went down that day with his friends, it was to find that the massive carcass was gone. It took him a moment to truly realize how much more space there now was. The difference between now and when the corpse had been sprawled in the middle of the chamber was shocking.

"Bloody hell," Tracey murmured. "I never knew what kind of difference removing the carcass of a giant snake could do for the atmosphere."

"It does make this chamber seem less grotesque," Daphne added, looking at Harry. "What do you plan to do with this place?"

"I mentioned that this is going to be my workshop," Harry said. "I plan to redecorate it to suit my tastes."

"I hope you plan on getting rid of those statues," Hannah said, wrinkling her nose at the giant Salazar statues.

"I have to agree," Tracey added. "I respect Salazar as much as the next Slytherin, but I think this is a little too narcissistic."

"It would give me more space," Harry admitted. He thought for a moment, and then asked, "would you guys like to help me clean this place up? I'd like it to be habitable before I begin adding anything of my own."

"Isn't it already too late for that?" asked Tracey. "I mean, you were living in here like some kind of hermit before we—ouch!" Tracey yelped and rubbed her sides. "You two hit me!"

"No, we didn't," Susan said as she looked away.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Daphne added.

"Jerks," Tracey muttered.

"We don't mind giving you a hand," Susan said, ignoring Tracey's grumbling.

"Just let us know what you'd like us to do," Daphne added.

Harry frowned at the two. Perhaps he was imagining it, but it seemed like Susan and Daphne were becoming even closer than usual. It wasn't all that unusual for them to double team Tracey, and they were speaking to each other a lot more. He would often find them conversing when it was just the two of them. Every time he noticed them talk, he wondered what they were talking about.

"In that case, if you guys could start by scourgifying the place, that would be really helpful."

While Susan and Daphne merely nodded, Blaize frowned as he pulled out his wand. "What are you gonna be doing?"

Harry smiled. "I'm going to get rid of those statues."

XoX

Cleaning the Chamber of Secrets wasn't a one day process. It took nearly an entire week to properly scourgify the place. First they had to scourgify the floor. Since there was nearly one-thousand years worth of filth covering the floor, it took over two days of constant cleaning. During that time, Harry removed all of the Salazar statues that lined the room and replaced them with alchemically grown trees of his own creation. They were designed to help lessen the harmful chemicals that would be permeating the atmosphere once his experiments began.

On the third day, the floor was finished and everyone got started on the walls. This was even harder than the floor because the walls went really high up. What's more, there was rot and fungus stuck between the cracks due to water leaks. In the end, Harry and Tracey had to go up on their brooms to properly scourgify the walls and ceiling—which took another two days. By day seven the Chamber of Secrets was properly scourgified. However, it still lacked any personal touches. Sadly, those would need to wait.

It was December 15th, the day they would leave Hogwarts and spend the Christmas holidays with their families. Harry had originally not planned on leaving Hogwarts. Things change, however. Now that he was no longer lost within his own darkness, and especially since Sirius had been acquitted, he could admit that he wanted to spend time with his godfather.

The train ride home was a noisy affair. His friends were all talking excitedly, discussing what they would do during their holiday.

"Are you traveling anywhere, Hannah?" Susan asked.

"Not this year," Hannah replied as she practiced transfiguring the floating teacup in front of her. It changed from a teacup to a mouse, and then to a jewelery box before going back to the teacup. "My dad said he wanted to stay in Britain this year."

"You don't sound too disappointed about that," Tracey said.

Hannah shrugged as her tongue poked out of her mouth. She waved her wand, and the teacup became a small watch. "I'm not really upset. Honestly, I don't think I want to go anywhere right now. Too much has happened this year for me to feel good about leaving."

"I guess so."

"I doubt my parents and I will do anything special," Lisa said to Blaize, Neville, and Terry. "We never go out during the holidays. My sister will complain, but our family isn't rich."

Neville smiled awkwardly. "My family is pretty well off, but Gran doesn't like doing anything. We'll probably have a large family gathering, but we won't go out and do anything spectacular."

"What about you, Blaize?" asked Terry.

Blaize looked at the ceiling, as though doing so might provide him an answer. "Knowing my mum as I do, we're probably going to have a huge party of some kind. I think she's planning on inviting all of you, though don't quote me on that. I'm not sure what her plan is, to be honest."

"Typical."

Harry sat between the window and Daphne. He wasn't looking at her, though he could see her reflection in the window. He could also feel her playing with his hand.

A part of him wondered if he should make her stop; the other part wanted to bask in human contact. It kind of bothered him. He felt like he shouldn't have been this comfortable with physical contact.

Perhaps it was thanks to Lisa Crawft. For as long as he'd known her, Lisa was the kind of person who hugged first and spoke later. When they were at her house, she would sit as close as possible. When she was tired, she would lay her head on his lap and ask him to stroke her hair. When they walked, she held his hand. If she'd not been so hung up on this kind of touching, Harry was sure this sort of contact would bother him like it did other boys his age.

Then again, maybe it's my fault for indulging her, the thought made him release a wry chuckle.

"You've been acting kind of weird today," Daphne said, breaking him from his thoughts.

"Have I?" Harry murmured.

"Yes." Nodding, Daphne said, "Are you thinking about your muggle friend?"

Muggle? Whatever happened the Mundane?

Frowning, Harry said, "I... maybe a little. I didn't see her at all this summer, so..."

Daphne smiled as he trailed off. "You're nervous."

"I guess I am." Harry wanted to rub his forehead in consternation. Since when had Daphne been able to read him so well? "Knowing her, she's probably been worrying herself sick. I have to confront her and apologize for disappearing, but I... I don't know what to say."

This wasn't something that he could plan a speech for. Even if he had a speech memorized, words spoken as though they were being read from a script wouldn't be of any use. He would need to speak from the heart.

Harry hated speaking from the heart. It was too messy.

He received a jolt when Daphne, letting go of his hand, instead reached for his arm. She leaned over and placed her head against his shoulder, as if to use it as her pillow.

"You'll come up with something, I'm sure," Daphne said. "This is you, after all. Just be honest."

"Honest, huh..." Harry looked around. No one seemed to have noticed Daphne's action, and she'd already pulled away, leading him to believe she'd moved away before the others could realize what was happening. "By the way, where's Astoria?"

"She's with her friends," Daphne said. "Astoria is quite popular with her peers. I don't want to cramp her style by hovering around her."

"I see." Harry paused. "It must be lonely, not having Astoria around."

Daphne smiled. "It is, but I'm just happy she's enjoying herself. Even if it's not with me, so long as Astoria is having fun, I can be happy."

"You're a really good sister."

"Thank you."

Daphne's answering smile was like a panacea for the soul.

XoX

Harry felt the train rumble as it slowed into Platform nine and three-quarters. A glance out the window revealed hundreds of parents waiting for their children to exit the Hogwarts Express.

"Welp! Time to head out!" Tracey said as she hopped to her feet.

"Always the enthusiastic one," Daphne mumbled with a sigh.

"Of course! One of us should be enthusiastic."

The group waited for a bit before exiting the compartment. Harry floated everyone's luggage down from the overhead rack as the rest of the students vacated the train and rushed onto the platform.

As Harry set foot on the platform, he gazed around, staring at parents hugging their children, at children speed talking about all the crazy things that happened to them. Everyone looked like they were having fun.

"Hey, Harry!"

The crowd parted as a grinning man walked toward him. Sirius Black was given a wide berth. The people around him eyed the man as though he might go on a killing spree at any moment. Despite the wary looks of the people around him, Sirius wore a grin that could have split his face in

half.

"Harry!"

He should have been prepared for it, but when Sirius lifted him into a bear hug, Harry nearly froze. Matters only became worse when his feet left the ground as Sirius spun around like a gleeful child. He even laughed with child-like exuberance.

"Sirius," Harry mumbled, his cheek squished against the man's chest. "Put me down."

Still laughing, Sirius did as told. "How've ya been Harry? Been having fun with your two girlfriends?"

Harry twitched at Sirius mentioning the aforementioned girlfriends, but then he sighed and smiled wearily. "I have been having fun, thanks for asking."

"Anytime." Sirius rubbed his hands together. "So, how about introducing me to your friends."

Agreeing, Harry turned around to his friends and gestured to Sirius. "Everyone, the reprobate standing behind me is Sirius Black—"

"A reprobate?" Sirius questioned. "Why does that sound like something your mum would say?"

"My godfather. Please be sure to stay at least ten feet from him at all times. You might catch rabies if you don't."

"What am I? An animal?"

"Such a dumb question should have never been asked."

"Wow," Tracey muttered before Sirius could come up with a suitable reply. "You're really Sirius Black, right?"

"I am seriously Sirius Black," Sirius said.

While the others still seemed somewhat flabbergasted at being in the presence of someone so infamous, Susan stepped forward and made a polite bow. "Um, it's nice to meet you again, Mr. Black."

Sirius blinked. "You're Amelia's niece, right?"

"Um, yes, that's me."

"Thought so. It's nice to see you again. I hope my godson has been treating you well."

"He's treated me very well, thank you."

"Good to know that my godson is learning to follow in my footsteps."

"I have no idea what you mean by that," Harry said morosely.

"You met Sirius Black before now?" Daphne asked.

"It was when the headmaster called Harry up to his office," Susan said.

"I feel like I should have gone with you." Daphne sighed and stepped forward before giving Sirius a polite curtsy. "I'm Daphne Greengrass. We've never met, but it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Daphne Greengrass," Sirius murmured, his grin widening. "I hear you and Harry are really close. A certain wolf told me that you two have been seen holding hands and everything."

While Daphne turned her head in a vain attempt to hide her blush, Harry frowned at the man. He was beginning to realize that all adults enjoyed teasing kids way too much. Why did every joke that came out of an adult's mouth have to be a relationship related one?

"Sirius Black?" a voice said from within the crowd.

Everyone turned around to see a woman walking through the throng of people. A slit on the left side of her long, black dress opened as she walked, revealing a pale, lean leg. Her hair, artfully done up in several braids with a few strands left over to frame her face, bounced as she

walked. Celestina Zabini. The woman looked every bit as sinful as Harry remembered.

"Celestina," Sirius said with a voice that made Harry wonder if his godfather had been punched in the gut. "Is that you?"

"Sirius..." Celestina took a few more steps, and then stopped. She raised a hand to her chest, took a deep breath, and then smiled. It looked shaky to Harry. "How long has it been since you and I last saw each other?"

Sirius smiled broadly, though there was a certain tremor to it. "About fifteen years, if I'm not mistaken. The last time I saw you, you were getting married... Lysander Nott, wasn't it?"

"Ah, yes. That's right. Lysander."

"How is your marriage, by the way?" asked a curious Sirius.

"Oh, my husband is dead." Celestina's smile widened just a bit. "He died only a year into our marriage, the poor man."

"Uh-huh... I hadn't known that."

"I'm not surprised. With the war going on, you were more focused on surviving than what happened in my life."

The two continued to talk, and as they did, Harry thought he felt a hint of tension coming from Celestina. Sirius seemed unaware of it, though it may have been due to his own worries. He spoke like he and Celestina were old friends, but to Harry, Sirius looked like a spring that had been coiled too tightly. Harry wondered if Celestina might have been one of his godfather's previous... conquests at Hogwarts.

I should ask him about that. It could affect my alliance with Celestina.

Blaize appeared by Harry's side. A subtle frown had worked itself onto his face. "I had no idea your godfather and my mother were close."

"Me neither," Harry admitted. "I guess there's a first time for everything."

"I suppose."

Harry turned his attention from his godfather when a shout of "Daphne!" went up. Astoria Greengrass wove through the crowd, rushing up to her big sister. The younger blonde was giggling as she stopped in front of Daphne.

"There you are. I was wondering where you were," Astoria said.

The amused smile worn by Daphne spoke volumes. "Shouldn't that be my line? Where have you been?"

"I was saying goodbye to my friends," Astoria said before pausing. She tugged at Daphne's sleeve and pointed at Sirius. "Hey, sis, isn't that Sirius Black?"

"It is."

"Woah... think I could get his autograph?"

"I'm not sure why you'd want his autograph," Harry said as he walked up to them.

Astoria rolled her eyes. "Because he's famous, duh."

"I'm famous."

"I don't care."

Harry held back a smile. When he and Astoria had first met, she'd been so excited. Now she barely spoke to him, though it was better than when Harry had first returned after his self-imposed pity party.

"I suppose not. Do you really want his autograph?"

"Yes."

"All right then." Harry turned, cupped his hands to his mouth, and shouted, "Hey, Sirius! My friend would like your autograph!"

Her cheeks turning pink, a flustered Astoria grabbed Harry by the

shoulders and shook him. "W-what do you think you're doing, Potter?!"

"You said you wanted an autograph."

"I didn't want you shouting it for everyone to hear!"

"What's this about an autograph?" asked Sirius as he walked up to the group. Harry looked behind the man to see Celestina speaking with Blaize.

He pointed at Astoria. "She wants your autograph."

"W-what?!" Astoria squawked. "I-I don't! I—"

"Is that so? An autograph? All right!" Sirius surprised even Harry when he conjured a sheet of parchment and a piece of charcoal, signed the parchment, and handed it to the stunned Astoria. "There you go. One authentic Sirius Black signature. You should cherish that. You're the first of many, you know."

"Am I?" Astoria's lips twitched into an amused smile. "I guess that means I'm lucky."

"Very lucky," Sirius said with a cheerful grin.

XoX

Harry's friends had thankfully been unafraid of Sirius when they met, though the same could not be said of their parents. Terry's and Lisa's parents had been practically shaking as Sirius spoke to them. He supposed it was because they were the most normal. Celestina was an aristocrat and a cunning woman. She also seemed intimately familiar with Sirius. Madam Bones was the head of law enforcement, the Dowager Longbottom was about as unflappable as a woman could be, and Daphne's father was like a robot.

Speaking of Daphne's father, he hadn't appeared pleased to see Sirius. Granted, the way Sirius had thrown an arm around the man's shoulder and called him "Nat" probably hadn't endeared him to the man. Harry had the distinct impression that Nathaniel and Sirius had a sordid history

together.

After he and his friends had said goodbye, Harry had gone back to Grimmauld place with Sirius. The changes that the house had undergone still struck him as odd. Everything seemed just slightly off. The new carpet was lush and soft, the walls had been repainted, and the furnishing all seemed brand new. It was such a far cry from the original gloomy disposition of the manor that Harry still had trouble dealing with it.

"My Lord," the portrait of Walburga Black said, curtsying as he entered the hallway.

Remembering how Harry had cowed the portrait before, he wasn't surprised by the woman's respectful tone, and so he responded as a lord might to his subjects. "Walburga. I trust everything has been well here?"

"Indeed, My Lord," Walburga murmured respectfully as Sirius closed and locked the door. "Although it could have been better if my good-for-nothing son hadn't been so keen on redecorating the entire house. Thanks to him, I've not had single good night's sleep."

"Shut up, you old bat," Sirius said. "You're a portrait. You don't need to sleep."

"Even if I don't need sleep, that doesn't mean I don't enjoy it!"

"Then maybe you should have thought about that when you decided to have your portrait placed here!"

"It's not like I was the one who chose to be placed in the entryway, you stupid boy!"

"Stupid am I?! I'll show you who's the stupid one!"

Harry stood there as the pair argued and insulted each other, his fists clenched and his arms shaking. As the derogatory insults became ever more degrading, he clenched his teeth, and when Sirius started in on the "your mama jokes"—which made no sense because this was a portrait of his mom—he decided that enough was enough.

"*Silence!*" Harry spat in parseltongue.

Sirius and the portrait of Walburga went still. Harry glared at them. They shuddered.

"Why must you two constantly squabble like children in front of me? I have neither the time nor the desire to hear your petty arguments. Act your age!"

"Yes, sir!" Sirius squeaked.

"M-my apologies, My Lord!" the portrait stuttered.

Harry sighed. These two were so tiring. "I'm going up to my room. You two... try not to argue."

He didn't give them a chance to respond before wandering up the stairs. Harry's room was the second door on the right. Upon opening it, he was greeted to a room that could have passed for the room of Gryffindor's poster boy. Distastefully eying the gaudy decor and bright red walls, Harry closed the door, silently promising himself that he was going to redecorate this room.

Setting down his luggage, Harry flicked his wand at the suitcase, which caused the lid to flip open and several items to come soaring out. Each item went to a specific place. His clothing folded itself and went into his drawer, the items he'd decided he didn't need flew into a chest that Sirius had bought for him, and several photographs of himself and his friends at Hogsmeade set themselves on the desk in the western corner of the room. Once everything was in its proper place, Harry flopped onto his bed and let loose an intense sigh.

As he rested, his body sank into the mattress. Exhaustion engulfed him. He didn't know why, but he was tired. So tired...

... Harry sat up with a slight jerk. He blinked several times as he looked around, taking notice of the objects in his room and stifling a frown.

I must have fallen asleep.

That begged the question of what had woken him up so suddenly. He pressed a hand to his forehead, trying to ignore the slight pounding behind his temples. He had a headache. It happened when he only got around 15 or 20 minutes of sleep in a single sitting.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Someone knocked at the door. Sirius's muffled voice echoed to him seconds later, "Hey, Harry! You awake in there? Dinner is ready. You should come down and eat with me. I'd like to spend more time with my godson."

"Right."

Harry stood up, stretched his arms above his head as he stifled a yawn, and walked over to the door. Sirius was standing on the other side. His godfather wore a grin so bright Harry thought he might go blind.

"You coming down for dinner?" Sirius asked.

Harry sent him an irritable look. "I wouldn't have opened the door if I wasn't."

"Such a sour puss."

"So insufferable."

His lips twitched. Sirius's grin widened. Trying not to let his godfather see his smile, Harry turned and walked down the stairs.

"Come on, Sirius. Dinner's ready."

"Wasn't I just saying that?"

Dinner had already been set on the table when he and Sirius entered. It looked like Kreacher had gone all out. There were numerous dishes set on the table, pork loins and rolls, mash potatoes and gravy. Harry even saw grilled chicken and greens set to the side. Kreacher must have remembered that he preferred eating healthy.

They sat down and put food onto their plate. As they did, Sirius spoke up, "So I was thinking of a bunch of fun things we could do this holiday. Moony won't be coming for awhile, though he assured me that he would be here at some point. Once he gets here, I was thinking we could go shopping for a bike."

A bike?

"You mean a motorcycle?" Harry clarified.

Sirius nodded. "That's right. I gave my old one to Hagrid. While I could always ask him to return it, I think now's the perfect time to get a better one. Then you and I could take our time customizing it."

Harry had read a lot of books on mechanics and mechanical engineering. He'd never been able to put them to practical use, however, which was the greatest joy when it came to gaining knowledge. Harry barely needed a second to think about it before nodding.

"Sounds good."

"Awesome," Sirius said, clapping his hands together and rubbing them like an evil mastermind who'd concocted a most devious plan. "Then tomorrow we can start—"

"Not tomorrow," Harry interrupted.

"Huh?"

"I can't tomorrow."

Sirius frowned. "Why not?"

"Because tomorrow I'm going to see a friend," Harry answered, and then, in a voice so soft, he added, "a very dear friend."

XoX

Life had not been very fun since Harry disappeared. No one seemed to know where he was. Lisa still remembered when she'd gone to the

Dursleys and asked about Harry's whereabouts. Her shock when they had given her a look like she was stupid and asked who Harry was had been a kick to the gut.

Lisa had panicked after that and gone to her mum, frantically trying to tell her mum that Harry had vanished and no one knew who he was. Her mum had barely been able to understand her. She'd been asked multiple times to calm down, and when she was finally able to get out what she wanted to say, her mum hadn't believed her.

Her mum had gone to the Dursleys and asked them where Harry was. They had given her a lot of lip, especially when she'd stormed past them and gone in search of Harry. However, to her mum's shock, there hadn't been a single clue as to where Harry was. All of his stuff had been gone. In fact, the entire room that Harry had been living in was empty.

Lisa's mum had panicked after that. They'd gone to the police and informed them that her friend had gone missing. The police had gotten involved. They'd gone to investigate, heading to the Dursleys and even going so far as to contain Vernon when he became belligerent. However, no matter what they did, no one could figure out where Harry was.

Harry's story had gone to the news. Newspapers and the TV had reported on the missing Harry, and everyone had been asked to report in if they had any information on him. Nothing had come of it. Eventually, with no reports on Harry's whereabouts coming in, the news had eventually stopped reporting, and he'd been assumed dead.

Lisa had been devastated. It was like someone had ripped her heart out. She'd stayed in her room after that, locking the door and refusing to answer anyone. Her mum had tried several times to make her come out. She'd refused. It wasn't until school had started and her father had broken the door down that she'd been forced to return to normal life.

School had started after that, but it wasn't the same. She'd tried getting in the groove of things, talking to her friends and doing what she'd always done, but she couldn't. All of her friends had talked about was what boy they liked, or what new clothes they had bought. It was like they had completely forgotten about Harry.

The last straw had been several weeks ago, when one of her friends had made an off-hand comment about how Harry must have disappeared because he was tired of being around people. She'd blown up on the girl, telling her that she didn't know what she was talking about. Her friend had gotten upset, and she had shoved her to the ground, and then she got in trouble with the principle for starting a fight.

Lisa had been suspended for a week. When she'd returned, a lot of her friends had started avoiding her. They turned away when she walked down the hall. They whispered behind her back. Lisa had ignored them. If they were going to act like that, then they weren't people she wanted to befriend anyway.

Of course, not everyone had abandoned her. Mari, a girl in her class and someone who never said a bad thing about anyone, remained friends with her. However, she was the only one.

"I was thinking of going out to get some ice cream and see a movie this weekend," Mari was saying as she and Lisa exited the bus and walked home. Mari lived several streets from her. "Do you want to come with me?"

Lisa hesitated before answering. Mari had been asking her if she'd like to come out and do something with her for nearly three weeks now. Lisa had turned her down every time. Much as she liked her friend, she didn't want to go out if she wasn't with Harry. At the same time, she knew that if she wanted to move forward, she would have to do something eventually.

"I'd... like that," she said softly.

"Come on. Don't be like that, Lisa," Mari complained. "Can't you just—wait. Did you just say you'll come with me this weekend?"

"Yes."

Mari gasped, then she smiled, and then she lunged at Lisa. "That's so great! I'm so happy! This will be the first time we've done anything together since... well, in a while."

"Yeah," Lisa said. "Sorry, I haven't been a very good friend lately."

"It's okay." Mari smiled. "I know you've been through a lot."

Lisa didn't know if she was as deserving of such forgiveness as Mari seemed to think, but she didn't say anything either.

She and Mari parted ways soon. After saying goodbye to her friend, she walked the rest of the way home, her small feet tapping against the pavement. As her house came into sight, Lisa looked up.

She froze.

Someone was standing in front her house. He had dark hair like raven's feathers and eyes like emeralds. He was wearing casual clothes, a pair of slacks and a fashionable jacket, which rustled as he raised an arm and ran his hand through his tousled locks.

"H-Harry?" she said.

Freezing for a moment, Harry turned slowly, his eyes widening as they landed on her. He opened his mouth, but he didn't say anything. Slowly closing his mouth again, he coughed into his hand and started over.

"Lisa, I—"

Lisa didn't hear anymore. She bounded over to him, bodily tackling Harry to the ground. A loud thump echoed in her ears, swiftly followed by the sound of all the oxygen in Harry's lungs being expelled.

"Lisa, what are you—" Harry started, only to stop abruptly.

"Harry... you jerk!"

Hot tears stung Lisa's eyes as she pounded a fist against Harry's chest. Her body, incapable of containing all of the pent up emotions inside of her, became wracked with painful sobs. Deep, shuddering breaths were expelled from her mouth, stifled by her crying.

"You stupid, insensitive jerk! Do you know how worried I was about you?"

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't cut it! You're an insensitive brute!"

"I'm sorry."

"Stupid... idiot..."

"I'm sorry."

Lisa felt Harry's arms as they wrapped around her, familiar and strong. Even though it had been months since she'd been held by these arms, Lisa still recognized them, still remembered how they felt. She closed her eyes and took a moment to bask in the feeling of being held.

"Is it really you, Harry?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes, it's really me."

"You're really back?"

"Yeah... I'm back."

Lisa sniffled. She rubbed her face against his shirt, covering it in even more tears. Then she lifted her head and smiled at Harry. Her face was wet, tears fell down her cheeks, and her nose was running, but she still smiled.

"Welcome back, Harry."

Harry returned her smile. "It's good to be back."

Here is the next chapter. I hope you enjoyed it.

I Am a Wizard

Chapter 14

I Am A Wizard

Harry had been lying on the pavement with a crying Lisa lying on top of him for twenty minutes and going. Her tears had stopped a minute ago. However, she continued to sniffle, and Harry, loathe to interrupt his friend as she poured out her emotions, waited until she stopped wiping her nose against his shirt before talking.

"I'm sorry for disappearing on you."

"You should be sorry," Lisa mumbled into his shirt. "Do you even realize how worried I was when you went missing? It was like you had completely vanished. The Dursleys couldn't even remember you for some reason. I had no idea what was going on."

He sighed. "I know, and I know I have a lot of explaining to do. I promise to tell you everything... but I think we should get off the ground and head into your house before I start talking."

Lisa shifted on top of him before slowly standing up. Harry stood as well, discreetly using a cleaning charm on his clothes to get Lisa's tears and nose fluids off his shirt. He then held out his hand for Lisa, who grabbed onto it and squeezed as though he might disappear if she didn't keep a tight grip.

They walked up to the house, and Lisa pulled out a key, unlocked the door, and then entered. Harry went in with her.

The Crawft's house looked just as he remembered. He glanced around as his feet tapped against the wood panels. To his right, he observed the carpeted living room, which had a comfortable-looking sofa, several chairs, and a television sitting on top of a stand.

"Are your parents home?" Harry asked.

Lisa shook her head as she lead him to her room. "No, Mum is out with friends and Dad is working. Neither of them will be home for a few hours at least."

That will probably make telling Lisa what I need to tell her easier...

Not much had changed in Lisa's room, though he could see a few new items dotting the landscape. He and Lisa walked around several footballs that lay scattered across the carpet as they traveled deeper into the room. A number of picture frames containing photos of when they were kids hung from the walls; they hadn't been there before. As he and Lisa sat down on her bed, Harry glanced at the desk, where several frames filled with pictures of them sat.

Lisa crossed her arms. She tried to look stern, but her eyes and nose were both red. "Start talking. I hope you have a good explanation for why you disappeared on me."

Harry would have smiled at the front Lisa was putting up if he hadn't felt so guilty. It gnawed at him like a black void consuming his soul, this horrible feeling of self-loathing. His friend was hurt because of him. While he'd always known that he was going to hurt her when he disappeared, he'd been so wrapped in his own darkness that he hadn't even cared. He truly was an awful friend.

"What I have to tell you is a long story, and it might be hard for you to believe," Harry began. He unsheathed his mother's wand. It had been so long since he'd tried to use it that he wasn't even sure if he could.

"What's that?" Lisa asked as she gestured to the wand.

"This... is part of what I need to tell you about."

Because he wanted to be safe, Harry cast several basic charms to mask their conversation, including a muffliato spell. It was dumb. However, a part of him was really worried that someone from the Ministry would find out what he was going to do here. If they learned that he was planning to tell a non-magical human about magic... well, he didn't want to know

what they would do.

So I can use my mother's wand now. I wonder if it's because the wand sensed my dark intentions before and refused to work with me?

It was an interesting theory. He would have to explore it later.

"Lisa," Harry said, taking a deep breath. Lisa leaned forward in anticipation. "I am a wizard."

Whatever she'd been expecting, that had apparently not been it. After nearly falling off the bed, she stared at him with a stupefied expression and put her thoughts in the most eloquent manner possible. With a "Huh?"

"A wizard. I'm a wizard."

Lisa stared at him for several seconds. The expression on her face reminded Harry of someone who'd never studied fine art suddenly being put in front of a Van Gogh painting. Finally, she placed a hand on his forehead.

"Are you feeling okay, Harry? You're not feverish, are you?"

"I'm feeling fine," Harry said, pushing her hand away. He held up his mother's wand. "Watch."

Harry flicked his wand at the photograph on Lisa's desk. Lisa gasped as the photograph rattled and then slowly rose off the wooden surface. It floated over to Harry, who held out his hand and allowed the object to silently land on it.

He looked at Lisa. "I'm a wizard. The school I go to is called Hogwarts. It's a school where witches and wizards go to learn about magic."

Harry launched into an explanation about magic; he told her everything he could, holding nothing back. He told her about his parents, their death, how he came to live with the Dursleys, and how he received his Hogwarts letter when he turned 11. Throughout it all, Lisa said nothing. She just sat there, her mouth slightly agape, her eyes widened to the size

of a snitch. He hoped she wouldn't pass out after he finished his story. That would have been cliched.

By the time he finished, not only had Harry spent an hour talking, but he'd transfigured her table into a lion-and then back to a table when Lisa freaked out-and repainted her walls to make them look like a somewhat decent replica of the Mona Lisa. Needless to say, Lisa couldn't dispute his words.

"This... this is a lot to take in," Lisa said at last.

Harry looked away. "I know. I'm sorry for dumping so much information on you."

"Don't apologize," Lisa said, though it was with a weary sigh, as if she now had the weight of an entire world on her shoulders. "I'm glad I know. I only regret not being able to help you. Also, I'm sorry about your friend."

A tremulous smile appeared on his lips. Harry hadn't neglected to tell Lisa about Hermione, as it was his friend's death that ultimately lead him to erasing the Dursleys's memory of him and disappearing.

"It's okay." He paused. "Aren't you angry at me?"

"You mean about how I'm only just now finding out that you're a wizard?" Harry nodded, and Lisa looked at her hands. "No... I feel like I should be, but it's not like you didn't want to tell me. You're not really supposed to. I know you'd get in trouble if people from your side found out you told me all this."

Your side. It wasn't something that Harry wanted to hear from Lisa, but he couldn't deny that there were sides. Lisa was not a witch. She was not a part of "his side." She was also correct. If the Ministry found out that he'd told her about all of this, they would both be in trouble, and she would have her memories of him erased. He would need to be cautious now that she knew.

"So, you're a wizard," Lisa said at last.

"Yeah."

"Do you think you can show me more magic?"

Harry smiled. "I think I can handle that."

For the next hour Harry performed various feats of magic. He showed Lisa apparition, transfigured objects, used glamor charms to change his appearance, and he even showed her his jaguar animagus transformation. That was, in fact, the last thing he showed her.

"So cool," Lisa muttered as she ran her hand down his back. Her fingers glided through his fur, gently scraping against his skin and making him purr with pleasure. Since animagus transformations literally turned animagi into an animal, the same strengths and weaknesses of their animal applied.

Jaguars, like most cats, had a weak spot on their back near their neck. When stroked, it made them weaker than a kitten. It took everything Harry had not to dig his claws into the carpet as he melted into a puddle.

"So what's this called again? Animagic?"

Harry transformed back into a human, and Lisa stepped back as he shook his head and stood up. "It's called animagus transformation."

"Right. Animagus." Lisa nodded. "This is really cool. I can't believe my friend's a wizard."

Harry smiled. "There are wizards all over the world. However, because of the Statute of Secrecy, we're not actually allowed to reveal ourselves."

"That must be hard on people when they're married to non-magical folk."

"Not really. If a witch or wizard marries a non-magical person, they're allowed to tell their spouse about it."

"R-really?" Lisa blushed.

"Yeah. Really." Harry let out a yawn as he stretched. Being in animal form always made his muscles tense. "Do you have any questions for me?"

Lisa shook her head. "No. I don't think so. Not right now, at least. To be honest, I'm still trying to take all this in."

Harry nodded and opened his mouth, prepared to ask if she wanted to watch something with him-when the door to her room suddenly opened and Mrs. Crawft walked in.

Lisa's mom didn't look much different than he remembered. She appeared a little more weathered. Her hair had lost some of its luster, her face seemed to have more lines. Even so, she remained the pretty woman that he recalled from his memories.

"Lisa, dinner will be ready... soon..." Mrs. Crawft trailed off. Her eyes landed on Harry. They slowly widened. "H-Harry?"

Harry straightened. "Mrs. Crawft, it's good to-"

He froze when Lisa's mum pulled him into a hug. He would have said something, but when Mrs. Crawft started crying, he remained silent.

The sound of a grown woman's cries echoed around the room.

XoX

Once she finished crying, Mrs. Crawft had given Harry the sternest lecture he'd ever received. He had spent nearly an hour standing in front of the woman as she angrily ranted at him, telling him that he was reckless, asking if he knew how much she and Lisa had been worried about him, and making him promise to never disappear like that again. Harry had agreed. What else could he do? Once she'd exhausted herself, Mrs. Crawft had pulled him into a fierce hug once more.

She had then started on dinner and asked Harry if he planned on staying. Sirius was going to "pick him up" in a few hours, but that was merely a formality. He was coming to introduce himself to the parents of Harry's friend. Harry had told Mrs. Crawft as much, stating that while he could have dinner with them, his godfather would be coming over eventually.

That was when Mr. Crawft had arrived.

The man had taken one look at him, frowned, and then wandered over to the sofa in the living room. He'd been sitting there ever since.

Harry had offered to help Mrs. Crawft in making dinner. She'd smiled at him and told him not to worry. Her exact words had been, "you should spend more time with Lisa, so leave the cooking to me."

Since Harry wasn't needed to cook, he ended up spending all of his time with Lisa. Of course, spending time with Lisa meant sitting in the living room and chatting as they watched a Disney movie.

"So, you're not going to stay the night?" Lisa asked, pouting at him.

Harry smiled. "I think we're a little too old to be having a sleepover."

Thinking about it, he and Lisa had been too old for a while now. They'd done it anyway because neither of them wanted their relationship to change, but ever since Harry had recognized that Lisa was a girl, he'd begun to realize how bad an idea sleeping at Lisa's house was.

"Ugh..." Lisa groaned. "That's what Dad said too. I can't believe you two would actually agree on something."

Harry glanced at Lisa's dad, who was eying the two of them. There was a satisfied smile on his face. However, when he saw that Harry was staring at him, he frowned and looked away.

Lisa stood up. Harry looked at her with a raised eyebrow, but she just smiled and said, "I need to use the loo."

As she wandered off, an uncomfortable silence filled the air. Harry glanced at Mr. Crawft. He didn't know what to say to the man, and it appeared the man didn't know what to say to him either. Neither of them spoke.

"My daughter," Mr. Crawft started causing Harry to look back up. "My daughter has not been the same without you here."

Harry blinked. This was the first time Mr. Crawft had ever said something to him that wasn't rude. Harry was more than a little shocked.

"Sir?"

"Do not think this means I'm giving her to you," Mr. Crawft continued. "I'm only saying this for the sake of my daughter's happiness. It's become clear to me that you make her happy. Keep making her happy, and you and I will have no problems."

Harry didn't know how to respond to this strange turn of events, so he just nodded.

Mr. Crawft's expression became hard enough to cut diamonds. "However, if you ever make my daughter as miserable as you have these past few months, no force in this world will stop me from making you regret being alive."

Harry gulped. He wasn't necessarily afraid of Mr. Crawft. Indeed, he was quite sure that, even if Mr. Crawft tried to harm him, the man wouldn't last five seconds against him. Even so, hearing Lisa's father say that made his insides squeamish.

Seconds later, Lisa came back in. As she sat down, she took one look at Harry's face, and then frowned. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Harry coughed into his hand. "I'm fine."

"Hmm..."

Lisa frowned for several seconds before shrugging. Moments later, Mrs. Crawft came into tell them that dinner was ready. Harry, Lisa, and Mr. Crawft all moved from the living room to the dining room, where they sat down for the feast that Mrs. Crawft had prepared for them. It was quite large. There was salmon and crab legs, salad, pasta, and French bread. It looked like Mrs. Crawft had gone all out.

While dinner wasn't quiet, it wasn't as talkative as it used to be. A strange tension hung in the air. Words were occasionally exchanged, but it was quiet most of the time.

Harry felt like this change in the atmosphere was his fault. It was because he'd disappeared on them, destroying his place among them. Now they

didn't know how to react.

Because he wanted to make up for what he'd done to everyone, when dinner ended, he cleaned the dishes. Mrs. Crawft had tried to tell him that he didn't need to. However, while Lisa's mum could be quite stubborn, so could he. In the end, she'd given up and let him do as he pleased.

Footsteps echoed to him as someone walked into the kitchen. The lightness of the steps let him know that it was Lisa. He didn't turn around, and she stopped walking. He could feel her gaze on his back.

"You know, Mum doesn't feel like you need to make things up to us or anything," Lisa said.

"I know," Harry said.

"Then why are you washing the dishes like you're trying to patch things up between us?" Lisa asked. Harry didn't answer her. She sighed. "Harry, I know you feel like you need to make things up to us, but you really don't. We're just glad that you're back."

"I know," Harry admitted, his voice a whisper. "And I know that you and your mum aren't blaming me for what happened. But still... I'm doing this because I wouldn't feel right if I didn't. Even if you tell me that everything is forgiven, I can't forgive myself."

"Oh, Harry." Lisa's footsteps started again. Harry froze when her body collided with his back. "Why are you always like this? You beat yourself up over everything? Whenever something goes wrong, you blame yourself and wallow in guilt. I hate seeing you like this."

Harry placed the rest of the dishes in the sink, and then he leaned back, allowing Lisa to embrace him. "I'm sorry."

Lisa buried her face in his neck. "Don't apologize."

"Sor-I mean, okay."

Harry wondered if there was something wrong with him for feeling guilty. He felt bad for giving in to Lisa's arms, for letting her comfort him. He was

supposed to be a pillar of support. It wasn't supposed to be the other way around.

A loud knocking echoed from outside of the kitchen. Harry strained his ears and listened as the door was opened by someone.

"Hello?" Mr. Crawft said.

"You must be Daniel Crawft," a voice said. Sirius. "I'm Sirius Black. Harry's godfather. I'm here to pick up Harry."

"I see. Mr. Black. I've heard of you. The news says that you were wrongfully accused of your friends murder over a decade ago and were only recently acquitted. Congratulations on finally having the truth brought to light."

"Thank you. I appreciate the sentiment. Is Harry in?"

"He's probably in the kitchen," Mrs. Crawft said. "I'll go see if he's still there."

Footsteps resounded in his ear. They grew closer to the kitchen. Harry was still turned to the sink, so he couldn't see when Mrs. Crawft entered, but he knew she had because her footsteps stopped.

"Hm... I guess I'll leave you two alone for a moment," she said after a long pause. "Harry, your godfather is here, so make sure you come out soon."

"Yes, Mrs. Crawft."

Mrs. left the kitchen. Harry frowned when Lisa pressed her nose to his back.

"Looks like it's time for me to go," Harry said. "Lisa?"

"... Don't want you to..."

"Huh?"

"I don't want you to go."

Harry felt a sullen smile tug at his lips. "I know, but I have to. Don't worry. I promise to come back."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

Lisa sniffed and let go of his back. Harry turned around and, before she could step backwards, he grabbed her arm and pulled her into a proper hug. Lisa stiffened, but then she relaxed into his embrace.

"I'm holding you to that," Lisa said.

"Of course." Harry let go of Lisa and took a step back. He held out his hand. "Would you like to meet my godfather?"

Lisa stared at his hand for a moment, biting her lip before, with some hesitation, she grabbed onto his hand. "Yeah... I would."

"Then come on."

Harry tugged on her hand, making her follow him into the living room. There, Mr. Crawft stood with Mrs. Crawft and Sirius. His godfather was wearing a grin, which brightened when he entered the room hand in hand with Lisa.

"Hey there, Harry! I'm guessing this is the friend you told me all about?"

Harry nodded. "Sirius, this is Lisa Crawft. Lisa, this is my godfather, Sirius Black."

"Um, hello Mr. Black," Lisa said, her voice more demure than Harry had ever heard it.

"What's with the formality?" Sirius asked. "Try not to be so serious and just call me Sirius."

"Sirius," Lisa said in a tone that suggested she wasn't comfortable being

so informal with a man she didn't know.

"You ready to go, Harry?" Sirius asked.

Harry nodded. "Yes."

Goodbyes lasted a while longer, in spite of what he had said. Sirius spoke with Mr. and Mrs. Crawft for several minutes, giving Harry plenty of time to give his friend a proper goodbye. Lisa had given him another hug and refused to let go. Mrs. Crawft had to physically pry the girl off of him. Harry supposed he should have just been glad that Lisa hadn't run off to her room. The last he saw of his friend before leaving was her teary-eyed smile.

As they were leaving, Harry looked back at the house. Lisa was standing in the window. When their eyes locked, she grinned and waved. Even from this distance, he could see the tears still falling down her cheeks.

I'll visit her again soon, Harry promised himself.

"So that's your muggle friend, huh?" Sirius said, his manner casual as they walked away from the house. "She's cute."

"She is," Harry agreed.

"I can't believe you're surrounded by so many cute girls."

"I'm not sure what you mean by that."

Sirius ignored him. "Let's see... there's Susan, Daphne, and now Lisa. So, which one do you like the most?"

"Is that a serious question?"

"As serious as my name."

"Meaning not very serious at all."

"Oi! I'm always serious!"

"If you say so."

As Sirius began to rant about how "serious" he was, Harry masked his sigh of relief with a smile. He'd properly succeeded in changing the subject. Even so, a part of him couldn't help but think about Sirius's question.

Romance seemed to be a big part of his life now that he was a little older. Granted, Lisa had always been into romance, and her mum would tease them about how they were such a cute couple for years. Harry used to ignore it. However, ever since the summer before his second year, their comments had been getting to him.

He didn't want to become involved in a romantic relationship, but he couldn't stop thinking about the girls in his life. His dreams often involved one or more of them. They were a constant presence now. Daphne and Susan had barely let him out of their sight since he returned to the fold, and he imagined that Lisa would be around near constantly during Christmas break. It was sad, but he wasn't going to be able to avoid thinking about it.

Who did he like?

That question bothered more than any other.

XoX

The next day, Harry went with Sirius and Professor Lupin (who asked that he go by Remus when not at school) to buy a motorcycle. Since motorcycles were a mundane creation, it meant they were all dressed in purely non-magical fashion.

Harry had elected to wear fashionable black jeans, a white T-shirt, and a name brand leather jacket. Unlike his clothing, which cost about as much as a well-made replica of fine art, Sirius and Remus had donned regular clothing. While Sirius wore a pair of jeans and a sweater, Remus was in a worn, gray suit.

They had gone to a motorcycle shop. It was a tiny place. The main building was only a few dozen meters wide, and the parking lot was only large enough to contain maybe 50 motorcycles. Even so, all the bikes they passed as they were lead on a tour looked like custom models.

Harry knew little about bikes-they didn't interest him-but even he could tell these were high quality creations.

"What exactly are you looking for?" the man who was leading them on the tour asked. He was a lanky person. His legs were long and gangly, and his arms were longer than average. They hung down to his knees.

"I want a Norton, if you have one," Sirius said. "If not, then let's go with a Viper."

"We have several Norton's," the man said.

They were shown several Nortons, like the Dominator and the Commando 961 SF MK II. While Sirius spoke with the sales person, asking all kinds of questions about torque and speed, Harry and Remus stood back and watched.

"This reminds me of the first time Sirius bought a motorcycle," the DADA professor said, wearing a fond smile.

"Was he like this before?"

"He was even worse," Remus said. "Back then, Sirius was having an argument with his parents, who felt like he wasn't a proper Black because he was in Gryffindor. Sirius had bought his first motorcycle as a means of getting back at his parents. He'd then gone and customized it for the next year or so. He added all kinds of magic enchantments."

"I imagine you helped him with those," Harry said.

"I did help with some of them, but your mother cast the majority of the enchantments." Remus paused. "Lily was the most talented person at Charms that I've ever known. I don't know if you know this, but after graduating from Hogwarts, she'd studied under an enchantress for two years."

"I hadn't known that," Harry admitted.

It sounded like there was a lot about his parents that he didn't know. Thinking about it logically, he understood that he couldn't know

everything, but he was still surprised. His mum and dad had told him so many stories. At the same time, they'd only had one year together, and a single year was not enough to learn everything about someone-even for one with eidetic memory.

"Oh! I like this one!" Sirius's loud voice snapped Harry's attention back to the present.

The motorcycle that Sirius was being shown was a slick motorcycle that looked like a streamlined war horse. Covering much of the vehicle was red plating, which had an organic appearance as opposed to one with hard angles. The end piece was tapered. Meanwhile, the front was also kind of bulbous. The engine was the only part visible, but even that was covered by what appeared to be flaps. Long metal pipes jutted from the engines and shifted into a single exhaust near the back.

"You like the Viper V10?" the sales person asked. "That's definitely a good one, though it's a bit more expensive than most of the other motorcycles here."

"I don't care about the price," Sirius said. "I'm buying this one."

The man didn't seem displeased by this. His lips kept twitching as if he was trying to hide a smile. Harry imagined he was thinking about the commission he'd get for selling this bike.

The process for buying the motorcycle was easy. After filling out some paperwork, Sirius paid the man in cash. The slack-jawed expression that the salesperson had worn was pretty impressive. Harry was surprised his jaw hadn't dropped to the floor.

Sirius had then made Harry get on the back and drove them to Grimmauld Place. Remus had apparated. It was still early in the afternoon, so Harry decided to make some lunch and head to Lisa's house. His idea was to go on a picnic with her. He'd done his best to ignore the kissing noises that Sirius had made as he was leaving.

Standing in front of the Crawft's residence after apparating in a nearby alley, Harry knocked several times and waited. In his hands was a basket filled with the food he'd prepared. Kreacher had complained when he saw

that Harry was cooking food, but he wasn't about to let a house elf outdo him when it came to cooking for his friend.

The one who answered the door wasn't Lisa. Harry shifted when Mr. Crawft opened the door. After frowning at him for nearly a full thirty seconds, Mr. Crawft sighed, looked back into the house, and said, "Lisa! Harry Potter is here!"

"Harry is here?" a shout came from inside. Then came the footsteps, followed by Lisa pushing past her dad and leaping at him. "Harry!"

Stumbling backwards after Lisa slammed into him like a pro-wrestler, Harry was barely able to keep from falling. He wrapped an arm around her waist as he put his left foot back to stabilize himself. Lisa laughed as she looked up at him.

"I'm glad you're back!"

Harry smiled. "I came to see if you'd like to go on a picnic with me."

"A picnic?"

"Yes."

Lisa's eyes gained a vibrant sheen as her smile widened. "I'd love to!"

Mr. Crawft, who'd been watching them from the doorway, grunted. "Be sure not to come home too late."

"Don't worry," Lisa said as she wrapped her arms around one of Harry's. "We'll come back before it gets dark."

The nearby park didn't have many people there. Harry didn't find that odd, given the cold weather, though he had expected there to be a few kids at least. Since no one was there, he chose a spot in the sun. He set the basket down, pulled out a blanket, and spread it across the grass.

"I'm kinda surprised to see you again so soon," Lisa admitted as she sat down.

"I didn't spend any time with you all summer," Harry said. "I figured I should make up for lost time."

"Lost time, hmm?" Smiling, Lisa looked off into the distance and nodded several times. "Yeah, I guess you do have a lot of lost time to make up for. You should do everything in your power to make it up to me."

"I know. I plan to make it up to you however I can."

Lisa gawked at him. Then her face turned bright red as she shook her hands back and forth in a warding gesture. "I-I was just kidding! I already told you there's nothing to make up for! I forgave you the moment you explained everything to me."

Nodding, Harry said, "I'm aware of that. However, it doesn't really change the fact that I hurt you. I can't make up for what I did in the past, but I'd like to make things right by being here for you now."

As she calmed down, Lisa leaned back on her hands and sighed. "You always did take things like this personally. Even when I tell you not to worry about something, you still take it upon yourself to make up for any perceived misbehavior on your part."

Shifting uncomfortably, Harry tried to deny Lisa's words. It wasn't like he always took the blame for something upon himself. He only did that when he had made a mistake. One could not consider themselves an adult if they couldn't recognize when they were wrong and do all in their power to atone for their mistakes.

Harry changed the conversation to Lisa and her schooling. He took out their lunch as she spoke, setting the sandwiches he made on a plate and handing it to her. Lisa chattered on about how she didn't like her school because everyone had forgotten about him, or how none of her friends talked to her anymore. It seemed she was having a hard time fitting in.

"I just can't seem to get along with anyone these days," Lisa concluded. "It's, like, I don't know, I just feel like all the people I spend time with aren't actual friends, like they're just people I know and hang out with because I don't have anyone else to spend time with."

Even though he knew that, technically, it wasn't his fault, some part of him still felt responsible. If he hadn't become such a large part of Lisa's life, she wouldn't have had trouble fitting in. Maybe if he'd never befriended her, then-

"Stop that."

"Ouch!" Harry winced as Lisa pinched his hand. Shaking his hand, he sent her a mild glare. "What was that for?"

"Because you were about to start blaming yourself for my school life," Lisa said, crossing her arms. "You can't fool me. I know you too well."

"So it seems," Harry said.

"Right. So stop being a sour puss. I'd much rather smile and laugh with you than mope around on what should be a happy moment."

"You're right." Harry smiled at Lisa. "Thank you."

Lisa returned his smile with a grin. "Anytime."

As the picnic continued, Harry became aware of the fast pace of his heart. It was beating faster than usual. While he didn't let Lisa know about the way his heart felt like a drum solo to a Weird Sister's cover band, he couldn't help but feel worried.

Why did his heart beat so quickly whenever he was around his friend?

XoX

Saint Mungos hospital had several patients already inside when he and Sirius entered. There was a young child sitting on the chair, kicking his legs back and forth as he belched out green bubbles. An older gentleman sat several meters away from the kid, several lumpy, undulating protrusions growing from his body at random.

Harry walked up to the front, Sirius trailing behind him. He stopped in front of the register. "Hello. I'm Harry Potter, and I'm here for my appointment with Ms. Emily Smith."

The woman behind the register, a plump woman with large lips, jerked at his name. She looked up and her eyes widened. "M-Mr. Potter. Emily has been expecting you. If you'll fill out this application form, I will let her know that you are here."

Harry took the application form offered, thanked the woman, and filled out his form using the quill that the woman had provided. After handing it back, the woman stood up and left. Harry assumed she was going to let Emily know that he was there.

"Saint Mungos... it's been a long time since I've been here," Sirius said as he and Harry sat down.

"You're probably going to be coming here a lot more now," Harry said. "While my potions have done a good job healing your body, there might still be some problems they didn't fix. You'll need to be checked up at least monthly."

Sirius grimaced. "I'm not a big fan of getting check ups."

Harry felt his lips twitch. "I think you might change your mind once you meet Ms. Smith."

As if his words were a magic spell, Ms. Smith walked into the room. She looked just as he remembered. Her long, black hair swayed behind her. She wore a mediwitch overcoat, which swished as she walked. A youthful face with brown eyes, lush lips, and a pink blush on her cheeks reminded Harry that this woman was still only in her twenties.

Sirius looked like he'd been struck by Cupid's arrow. His eyes were wide, and there was a large blush staining his cheeks. Before Ms. Smith could even open her mouth, he was before her, smiling in what Harry guessed was supposed to be a suave look.

"I had no idea the doctors at Saint Mungos seconded as angels. Do you think you could heal me? I'm suffering from heartache, and only you can fix it for me."

Ms. Smith took one glance at him, and then walked around him as if he wasn't even there. Sirius's jaw dropped as Ms. Smith stopped in front of

Harry and began speaking. "Mr. Potter, it's a pleasure to see you again. I read about what happened recently. You have my condolences for your loss."

Harry knew that Ms. Smith was being courteous, but he didn't want to talk about the past, not now, not here. "Thank you. A lot has happened, but I'm fine now. More importantly, I think something is wrong with my magic."

"So I've heard. Come on back and we'll give you a check up." Ms. Smith turned and began walking away. Harry looked at Sirius, who remained frozen in place, and then followed Ms. Smith.

Footsteps behind him alerted Harry that Sirius was following. Ms. Smith lead them into a medical room and bade Harry to sit down on the hospital bed. As he did, Sirius walked over to a wall and leaned against it, crossing his arms. Ms. Smith took out her wand and began performing basic diagnostic spells.

"So, what seems to be the problem?"

"My magic has been fluctuating wildly. Some of my spells have been overpowered, out of control."

"Overpowered in what way?"

"Such as when my *glacius* spell froze an entire barrel and the ground around it when I was only trying to put out a fire, or when my levitation spell sent an object flying toward the ceiling instead of hovering above the ground. I once used an *augmenti*, and instead of shooting a small stream of water, it sent a jetstream that nearly broke the trunk of a tree."

Ms. Smith hummed as she cast another spell. Harry's body was covered in a light blue aura that caused his skin to prickle. "That does sound like a problem. I'm going to catalogue your magical index again, to see if there are any changes."

"That sounds fine."

Ms. Smith glanced at Sirius, then back at Harry. "Do you want him to

stay, or should I kick him out?"

"Oi!" Sirius apparently took offense to the dismissive way Ms. Smith talked about him.

"Sirius can stay," Harry said.

"Very well. Then let's begin."

Harry remained perfectly still as Ms. Smith began creating runes all around him. Having studied up on those runes since the last time he was here, Harry could name all of them, and he knew how they worked in conjunction together. He didn't know if he could perform this spell, though. He hadn't learned anything about Rune Projection, the magic that she was using to carve runes into the air.

"Hmm..." Ms. Smith frowned. "Have you undergone any recent changes?"

Furrowing his brow, Harry asked, "changes?"

"Like have you had any mental or emotional changes?" Ms. Smith clarified. "People who undergo changes in their mentality can sometimes experience a change in their magic."

"So, my magic has changed," Harry said.

"It seems to have become... lighter, for lack of a better term," Ms. Smith said. "Thanks to the curse that remains from when the dark lord tried to kill you, your magic has always held a kernel of darkness. However, it looks like the darkness has been repressed, for lack of a better term."

Lighter, huh. The only thing Harry could think about that might have caused this change was Daphne and Susan, the two who'd become a constant presence in his Hogwarts life. Without them, he would've been swallowed by his own darkness. While his other friends were a big help, those two were the ones who'd spent the most time helping him. A part of him actually felt guilty for relying on them so much.

"I understand," Harry said, sighing. "You're not wrong. I have gone

through a few changes."

"I thought as much," Ms. Smith said. "Your magical index hasn't changed. It's the same as it was last time, so I figured that must be it."

Sirius walked up to the bed, his face set in a concerned frown. "This change isn't going to affect Harry, will it?"

"Don't worry," Ms. Smith assured him. "The effects are only temporary. Once his magic has settled down, Harry's spells will go back to normal."

"That's good," Harry said. "I was a little worried about this change."

Ms. Smith stood up. "Well, you can rest easy. You have nothing to worry about."

Harry also stood up. "Good to know. Thank you for the check up."

"You're welcome."

"Come on, Sirius," Harry said. "We're leaving."

"Actually, I was thinking maybe I could stay here and-ouch!" Harry ignored Sirius's pleas as he grabbed the man by the ear and pulled him out. "Ow! Ow! Ow! Call me soon, Doctor!"

After leaving Saint Mungos, Harry and Sirius apparated back to Grimmauld Place.

Sirius spent the next several hours sulking.

XoX

Harry was glad to know that his magic wasn't being adversely affected. It was a large load off his shoulders. That said, it was only one resolved issue among a series of other, unrelated problems.

First and foremost on his mind were his friends, not just Lisa, but his magical friends. Daphne and Susan, in particular, were on his mind. He wanted to gather everyone together and do something fun. Sadly, he

wasn't sure what they should do. A simple get together? Go out and see a movie? His friends might enjoy learning more about the non-magical world. He could even invite Lisa that way.

Sirius's new motorcycle was also on his mind. He, Remus, and Sirius had started working on the motorcycle the day after Saint Mungos. Remus did most of the enchantments. Harry had learned that while Remus didn't have his mother's ability at charms, he was skilled enough to cast most of the enchantments that had been on Sirius's original bike.

There were three basic enchantments that the bike used: A levitation enchantment to help the bike fly, an invisibility enchantment, and a refueling enchantment. The refueling enchantment was the one that Harry was most interested in.

It was a spell based on a theory known as the Theory of Transfiguration Particle Relativity. By taking in the various carbon particles floating in the air, the enchantment will transfigure it into fuel, ensuring that the motorcycle would never run out of power. Such an efficient method of fueling was genius. Not only would it mean the motorcycle never had to be refueled, it also helped clear up the atmosphere.

Harry didn't know any enchantments. He spent most of the time watching, though he did ask Remus many questions on the enchantments he added.

While Sirius knew nothing about enchanting, he was an able mechanic. Even now, he'd taken off the chrome chassis and was working on the engine. His clothing, an old shirt and ripped jeans, were covered in grease as he took the engine apart.

Harry knew enough about mechanics to know he was upgrading the parts. Sirius had gone out the previous day and bought a bunch of new motorcycle parts. Harry didn't know what they were, or what they did, but they appeared to be mostly engine parts and exhausts.

"What are those new parts supposed to do?" Harry asked as Sirius finished screwing in one of the new pieces. His voice echoed across the room.

They were in the "hanger" as Sirius called it. The large space could have easily fit a single person airplane. Concrete walls, floor, and ceiling surrounded them, and the only way out was through a door on the north eastern corner of the room.

Wiping his head, which consequently caused it to become covered in grease, Sirius said, "These new parts will add power to the engine, allowing me to reach top speeds faster."

"And the metal cylinder things?"

"Mufflers to give the engines a nice purr."

"I see..."

Sirius finished up his work. Then he went to take a shower while Harry traveled up to his room. He sat down at his desk, smiling when a plate of whey chocolate chip cookies appeared, and pulled out some paper and a calligraphy pen. He started writing a letter to his friends. He wanted to invite them all to his house, including Lisa. Harry didn't want to leave her out of anything.

As he finished writing his letters, Hedwig's presence touched his mind. He stood up, went over to the window, and opened it just as Hedwig flew inside. She landed on the desk. Harry summoned some owl treats and walked up to her.

"Hey, girl. Did you have a good hunt?"

"Hoot!"

"That's good. Try not to eat too many mice, though. It'll spoil your appetite."

"Hoot!"

"Well, I guess it's true that you mostly eat mice anyway... but you don't know where those mice have been."

"Hoot! Hoot!"

Harry sighed. "Fine, but don't blame me if you get sick-ouch!"

Wincing, Harry healed his now bleeding hand. Meanwhile, Hedwig puffed up her feathers and glared at him.

"All right. All right. I think that's enough joking around." Harry grabbed his now rolled up letters and placed them in a pouch. "Think you can deliver these for me?"

"Hoot!" Hedwig gave him a look that all but said, "*who the hell do you think I am?*"

"Right. Here you go."

Harry placed the pouch around Hedwig, who shifted a bit before hooting. With a flap of her wings, the white owl took off, disappearing out the window. He watched until she was gone. Then he grabbed his plate of half-finished food and left the room.

He was going to spend some more time with his godfather.

XoX

Harry paced back and forth across the living room, which was a massive space filled with cozy furniture. He walked the entire length of the brand new leather sofa. Then he about faced and walked back the other way. Sitting on the sofa, Sirius stared at him with an expression that Harry had seen on a certain Cheshire Cat that starred in a certain Disney cartoon.

"You really should stop pacing like that," Sirius said. "You're going to wear out the carpet, which is brand new by the way."

"I can't help it." Harry reached the end of the sofa, turned around, and walked back to the other end. "This is the first time Lisa's going to meet all my friends... and it's the first time my Hogwarts friends are going to meet a mundane person."

"Mundane?"

"What if they don't get along?" Harry continued, ignoring Sirius's

questioning gaze. "They come from two different worlds, so there's no telling what could happen. Also, Lisa is the only one who can't use magic. What if that makes her uncomfortable?"

"Wow." Sirius whistled. "You really are a worrywort, aren't you?"

Harry opened his mouth to reply, but the doorbell chose that moment to ring. While Sirius slowly lumbered to his feet, Harry rushed out of the room, into the hallway, and toward the door. After fumbling with the lock, he threw the door wide open.

"Harry!" Lisa shouted as she leapt on him.

Harry caught his friend in a hug, twirling her around and laughing. Seeing her smiling face made him relieved. Perhaps there was something pacifying about her presence, but whatever the case, he felt like a weight was being lifted off his chest.

Mr. and Mrs. Crawft stood in the doorway. Harry greeted them courteously, but most of his attention was on Lisa. He let Sirius do most of the talking to the adults.

"Be sure to have fun, Lisa," Mrs. Crawft said.

"I will!" Lisa beamed.

Mr. Crawft grunted as he and Mrs. Crawft left. The door shut. Seconds later, Harry heard the engine of a car starting.

Smiling at his friend, Harry said, "Come on, Lisa. I'll give you a tour of the house."

Lisa smiled back. "Okay!"

"You kids going on a tour of the house?" Sirius asked.

"That's right," Harry said.

Sirius clapped his hands together. "All right then. Let me join you. I know a bit more about this house than you do, Harry."

"Fine," Harry mumbled after thinking about it for a moment. It wasn't like he really needed to be the only one showing her around, though the thought of not getting to be alone with Lisa did rankle on his nerves for some reason.

As they were heading up the stairs, the portrait of Walburga followed them. Portraits could not detect magic, so Harry didn't think it knew that Lisa was not magical, and he had no intention of letting it know that either. The portrait might listen to him. However, if he suddenly became friendly with someone from the mundane world, that alliance would end.

With Sirius taking the lead, they showed Lisa around Grimmauld Place. Lisa reminded him of a child during the tour. Her big eyes were wide as she looked at the massive rooms, which were larger than they should have been, and the magical portraits that moved and spoke as they walked past them. Those portraits were given more than just a little attention. The moment one of them opened its mouth, Lisa bombarded him with thousands of questions regarding how a portrait could talk. By the time they had finished the tour, Lisa was slumped on the couch, reeling from shock.

"I never knew our worlds could be so different," she said. "I mean, I knew you had magic, but I don't think I was prepared to see how much that changed things. You really do live in a different world than me."

"Yeah," Harry said softly. He was sitting next to Lisa. "But you know, even if we live in different worlds, you're still my best friend."

"Best friend?" Lisa frowned.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, you and I have always been best friends."

Lisa smiled, but it seemed somewhat brittle. "Yeah... I suppose we have."

The doorbell rang again. Harry stood up, and Lisa followed suit. He walked into the hallway with his friend. Sirius was already opening the door.

"Oh, hey there, you three. I know you, but I don't know who you two are."

Harry walked up to the door, looked past Sirius, and felt a moment of shock. Blaize, Daphne, and Tracey were standing in the doorway. Daphne was the first to notice him. Her lips curved into a smile.

"Harry, it looks like you're doing well," she said before her eyes landed on Lisa.

"Uh... yeah. It's good to see you too." Harry couldn't explain it, but for some reason, he felt nervous. His stomach was twisting into knots, and he thought he could feel an unusual heat on his back.

"Harry," Lisa said as she walked up behind him. "Who are these two?"

"Um, you mean three, right?" Harry asked.

Lisa looked at Daphne, and then Trace. Finally, her eyes landed on Blaize.

She looked back at Harry. "Right. Three. These three. Why don't you introduce me?"

"Okay." Harry coughed several times. "Uh... Blaize, Tracey, Daph-"

"Daph?" Lisa raised an eyebrow.

Harry barely withheld a squeak. "T-this is my friend Lisa. Lisa, these are three of my friends from Hogwarts. That's Blaize, Tracey, and Daphne."

"Yo!" Tracey gave Lisa a grin and a lazy salute. Blaize didn't say anything, but he did not in acknowledgement. Daphne, on the other hand...

"You're Lisa Crawft, right?" she asked.

Lisa stiffened under the blonde girl's gaze. "T-that's right."

Daphne smiled and grabbed Lisa's arm. "I'd like to talk to you... in private."

Lisa gulped.

XoX

Harry had no idea what Daphne said to Lisa. However, when the two came into the living room, Lisa had taken one look at him, blushed from her head to her toes, looked at Daphne, and then looked away just as quickly. Daphne was smiling. Harry wasn't sure he liked that smile.

"So, where is Astoria?" Harry asked.

"She's with Luna Lovegood," Daphne said as she sat next to him on the sofa. Lisa hesitated for a moment before sitting on the chair. Harry frowned. "I think she's still a little uncomfortable around you."

"I guess so," Harry sighed.

"Don't feel too bad." Daphne placed her hand on his. Lisa squeaked. "Astoria just isn't sure how to deal with you anymore. You were one of her heroes, you know? So when you... well, after what happened this year, you kind of shattered her illusions of you."

Harry grimaced. "I guess I can't blame her for that."

"Hey," Tracey said to Lisa, poking the girl in the side. "You all right? Your face looks like a pigmy puff."

"I doubt she knows what a pigmy puff is," Blaize said. Unlike the others, who were lounging around on the chairs and couch, he was standing by the window.

Tracey rubbed the back of her head. "That's right. I forgot."

"Idiot," Daphne said with a sigh as she pressed a hand to her forehead.

More people soon arrived. Neville came with the Dowager Longbottom. While the Longbottom matriarch engaged in conversation with Sirius, Neville joined Harry and the others.

"Hey, everyone!" he greeted in a cheery voice.

"What's up, Nev?" Tracey said with a grin as everyone else greeted him.

Introductions were made between Lisa and Neville, and then Lisa Turpin and Terry Boot when they showed up about ten minutes later. Lisa Crawft was shocked to find out that Harry knew another Lisa. Even so, she was pretty excited to meet someone else who had the same name as her. Soon after the two Ravenclaws arrived, Susan and Hanna showed up while the Dowager Longbottom left, and then the group left Grimmauld place and headed to the movies.

It was the first time for all of Harry's magical friends. They had never even heard of a movie theater, much less been to one. The expressions on their faces as he and Lisa lead them into the theater, with its red carpet, massive size, and gigantic screens showing trailers for the latest movies that were out, was impressive. Harry was reminded of a Sarlacc pit as he looked at their slack-jawed mouths.

"W-what the bloody hell is this place?!" Tracey squawked. Neither Daphne nor Susan were able to correct, such was their surprise.

"I never imagined the muggles could build something so large," Lisa Turpin said in awe.

Muggles... Harry frowned.

"And what about those people hidden inside of those boxes?" Terry asked. "What kind of magic is that?"

Lisa Crawft leaned over to Harry and whispered, "Do they really think those TVs are magic?"

"It might as well be to them," Harry whispered back.

"What are you two whispering about?" asked Susan.

"Nothing," Harry and Lisa said at the same time.

"I bet they're making fun of us for not knowing about movie theaters," Daphne said, eyeing them with a dry look. Lisa and Harry looked away from her. While his non-magical friend pretended to whisper innocently, he decided to engage the shocked Neville and Blaise in conversation.

The movie they were going to see that day was Jurassic Park. It was a new movie that had been produced by Steven Spielberg, a famous movie Director from the Colonies who'd created a number of movies and cartoons. Of course, only he and Lisa knew that. His magical friends didn't know squat, and the looks they had given him as Sirius went up to the booth and bought tickets made him feel stupid.

"You'll understand when you see it," he told them.

Once Sirius had the tickets, Harry directed everyone toward the concession stand. Since none of them knew the first thing about concessions, he bought everyone popcorn, drinks, and a few different types of candy. Tracey, being who she was, ate a good portion of her popcorn before they even reached the theater.

"Don't eat too much of that," Lisa warned. "If you eat too much popcorn, you're going to get fat."

"W-what?!" Tracey's aghast expression as she warily eyed the popcorn was hilarious. Everyone laughed at her, which caused the girl's face to turn bright red.

Everyone sat down. Lisa Crawft frowned when Susan and Daphne chose the two seats on either side of Harry. It looked like she wanted say something. Her mouth even opened and closed a few times, but then she looked around at everyone else, and she slowly sank into a chair between Neville and Daphne.

I'll spend some extra time with her later, Harry promised himself.

The movie eventually started playing, and all of Harry's friends became enraptured. Their gawking faces were impressive. Harry didn't think he'd ever seen anyone whose eyes could get so wide, never mind the fact that all eight of his magical friends had the same expression. He wondered if it was the dinosaurs that made them gape like that, or if it was the non-magical technology.

It's probably a mixture of both.

Once the movie was over, everyone hopped over to the train station that

would take them back to Grimmauld place. Since the train consisted of numerous long benches, Harry and the others were seated across the benches. Susan had ceded her seat to Lisa. Now Lisa and Daphne were sitting next to him, and maybe it was his imagination, but his mundane friend seemed to be more clingy than normal.

Girls are so weird.

"I just don't understand what those things were," Tracey confessed. "What's a dinosaur? Are they magical? They looked like demented dragons."

"Dinosaurs are creatures that existed somewhere between two-hundred and thirty-one and two-hundred and forty-three million years ago," Harry told her. "They're a form of giant reptile. The word dinosaur literally translates into terrible lizard. I actually have a theory that dinosaurs are the pre-evolved form of dragons."

"You're using a lot of big words," Tracey complained, holding her head as though she had the world's largest headache.

On the other hand, Lisa Turpin had sparkles in her eyes. "So you think dragons were originally dinosaurs? Do you have any evidence to support your hypothesis?"

While he and Lisa Turpin talked about how dragons were clearly an evolved form of dinosaur, Lisa Crawft pouted. "He should be paying more attention to me. I was his friend first."

Susan smiled at the girl. "Don't be too jealous. This usually happens once Lisa and Harry start talking about history."

"Harry always has been a history nut," Lisa sighed.

"Besides, you can't afford to be jealous," Daphne added. "Remember what we talked about before?"

While Lisa blushed, Harry frowned. "What did you two talk about?"

"Nothing," Daphne and Lisa said at the same time. His frown deepened.

It deepened even more when Sirius started snickering at him from afar.

Upon arriving at Grimmauld place, the group was given a feast prepared by Kreacher. Everyone spent that time eating and talking. When they were finished with their meal, they took their conversation to the living room and played games. Lisa Crawft was given her first taste of Exploding Snaps.

"I think I hate this game," she muttered after the cards exploded in her face for the 12th time.

Susan offered her a conciliatory smile. "It's fun once you get the hang of it."

"Are you being patronizing?"

"Not at all."

Harry leaned back against the sofa as Lisa bantered with Susan. Sitting next to him on the floor, Daphne twirled a strand of blonde hair between her fingers.

"You look like you're thinking about something," she said, clearly offering him an ear.

"I was just wondering if your father is okay with all this," he said. "I mean, I doubt he'd let you come with us if he wasn't, but I won't deny that seeing him let you go so easily has me worried. I can't help but wonder if he's planning something."

"Father is always planning something," Daphne informed him. "However, for the moment, I have you and Blaize's mum to thank."

"Celestina?"

Daphne nodded. "Thanks to her blackmailing Father with something, he's been a lot more lenient with me and Stori. Of course, you loosened the noose first. I'll always be grateful for that."

Harry had not been informed about Celestina blackmailing Nathaniel

Greengrass, but when he considered how out of touch he'd been, it made sense that he wouldn't know about this. So much had happened this summer. There was a lot that went on which he was unaware of. Thinking about how unhelpful he'd been bothered him.

"Well," he started, "I'm just glad your dad is letting you and Astoria have more freedom."

"Me too," Daphne said.

Harry's friends stayed for nearly an hour longer before, in groups of twos and threes, they left. Lisa Turpin was the first to leave. Her sister had come with their parents, and she tried to convince Harry to give her a tour. Lisa had dragged the older girl out of the house, apologizing as the older of the two complained like a child who'd been told she couldn't have anymore chocolate. Then Terry's parents came and picked up, followed by Celestina coming to pick up Blaize, Tracey, and Daphne. Susan and Hannah left next, and then Neville was picked up by his gran. Soon, the only person remaining was Lisa.

"So, those are your friends, huh?" Lisa asked. She and Harry were on the couch. Lisa was laying down and using his lap as a pillow. Harry was glad that he wasn't experiencing any male issues right then. That would have been embarrassing.

"Yeah..."

"They seem like nice people."

"They are."

"And they're all able to use magic?"

"Yeah."

"I'm so jealous. I wish I could use magic."

Harry placed a hand on his friend's head. "I wouldn't worry about that. Even if you can't use magic, nothing's going to change the way I feel about you."

"I'm not so sure that's a good thing."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing," Lisa mumbled, sighing as his fingers scratched her scalp.

"That feels good. Keep doing it."

"Yes, ma'am."

For the rest of Lisa's time there, Harry gently ran his hands through her hair.

He ignored the feeling of Sirius's grinning eyes on him.

I'm never going to hear the end of this, am I?

XoX

Harry Potter woke up in the middle of the night. Opening his eyes, he stared at the ceiling, wondering what the heck had woken him. It wasn't until his bladder told him he needed to use the restroom that he realized why he'd woken up.

Clambering out of bed, Harry exited his room and wandered down the hall. After taking care of business in the bathroom, he was about to wander back to his bedroom.

Several voices stopped him.

"I apologize for asking to meet you so late," said the voice of Madam Bones.

"Don't worry about it. I was already up anyway," Sirius answered.

"Sounds like I'm not the only one who has trouble sleeping."

Harry turned back around and crept down the stairs. He wandered into the hallway as the sound of a door closing echoed through the interior. That had been the kitchen door, which he silently crept up to. The door was closed, but he could still hear the conversation taking place on the

other side.

"So," Sirius began, "Can I ask what this is about?"

"I don't know how else to tell you this, so I'm going to just come right out and say it," Madam Bones said. "Peter Pettigrew is dead. One of our aurors found him early this morning hanging in his cell."

Another chapter, and it looks like we have a mystery on our hands. What happened to Peter Pettigrew? Will we find out? Will Madam Bones be able to determine what happened? Who knows? Find out next time on Dragon Ball-erm, I mean, find out next time on Harry Potter and the Really Bad Fanfic! XD

News, Parties, and Sleepovers

Chapter 15

News, Parties, Sleepovers

Harry froze before the door, his mind blanking as he tried to comprehend what Madam Bones had said, but he couldn't wrap his mind around it. Pettigrew was dead? How did this happen? What, or who, could have killed him?

Needing to know more, Harry opened the door and walked in. Sirius and Madam Bones jerked their heads toward him. Their eyes widened.

"Harry?" Sirius said as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "What are you doing awake?"

"Couldn't sleep," Harry said as he sat down at the table. "Please continue. I'd like to know more about Pettigrew's death as well."

Madam Bones looked at Sirius, who gave her a "*what are you looking at me for?*" shrug. She sighed, and then, beginning again, she said, "We're not exactly sure what happened. No one even realized that Pettigrew was dead until early this morning during a shift change."

"Let me guess," Harry started, "it was made to look like a suicide?"

Madam Bones gave him a mirthless smile. "If only things were that simple. When we found him, Pettigrew's body was mangled. His limbs were twisted like pretzels, and there was a look of horror on his face, as if the last thing he saw was so terrifying it became permanently etched onto his face."

It sounded like someone had tortured him before killing him and then hanging him. What Harry didn't get was the purpose. Why would someone go to so much trouble to kill a person like this? Were they trying to make an example of him? Who were they making this example to?

Was this punishment? Who could have punished him?

I wonder if one of the Death Eaters somehow killed him to keep him from being interrogated...

The theory was entirely possible. Pettigrew must have known who all the Death Eaters were, so he would have been able to identify them, which was another reason Harry had wanted to capture him alive. With Pettigrew's knowledge, they would have had enough evidence to sentence the Death Eaters who got out of a trial by claiming they were under the Imperius Curse.

"What about your aurors?" asked Harry. "Did they not notice anything unusual?"

Madam Bones shook her head. "That's the problem. No one noticed anything unusual."

Harry didn't get understand. For Pettigrew to have been killed in such a gruesome manner, he must have undergone intense pain. He should have been screaming his head off. Yet no one had even heard him. No one had known anything unusual was happening. That was just weird.

"Did you check your aurors to see if their memories had been tampered with?"

"We have." Madam Bones sighed and leaned back in her chair. Adjusting her monocle, she continued, "However, none of my aurors have had their memories tampered with or erased. Croaker of the Unspeakables has already verified this for me."

Tampering with a person's memories was generally a sloppy affair. To mess with someone's memories, they had to oblivate them and then replace what was lost with false memories. What's more, the false memories had to seamlessly merge with the real memories. Otherwise, you ran the risk of having the person whose memories you replaced realize that something was wrong.

Also, because of how fragile the mind was, erasing and replacing memories was a delicate procedure. Few people could do it right. In fact,

the act of tampering with someone's memories without giving them lasting brain damage was next to impossible. Erasing? Sure, that was easy. Tampering? No, Harry didn't even think Headmaster Dumbledore could seamlessly replace a person's memories with false ones.

"So... you think someone assassinated Pettigrew?" Sirius asked.

Madam Bones nodded. "That is what we believe."

"However, you have no information on who could have done it?"

"That about sums it up."

"Well, damn."

Harry stewed and thought about how Pettigrew could have been killed. Whoever killed him must have been a skilled assassin. Perhaps this person was an animagus. If someone had an animagus form that was small enough, they could have slipped in without anyone noticing, created a barrier to keep noise and distort one's sight, and then assassinate Pettigrew in as brutal a manner possible before slipping back out.

"Are there any wizarding assassins?" Harry asked. "I haven't looked into this because it didn't seem relevant to me, but if there are people who kill others for money in the wizarding world, one of the Death Eaters might have hired them to kill Pettigrew."

Madam Bones frowned. "There are Hit Wizards, but all of them work for the Ministry."

"That means very little," Harry said. "A good portion of the Ministry is controlled by people like Lucius. Besides, not everyone is altruistic. Slip the right amount of money into a person's pocket, and most of them wouldn't think twice about doing something illegal."

"I guess that's true." Leaning back in her head, Madam Bones looked at the ceiling and blew out a deep breath. "However, I would like to place my faith in the people working in the Ministry. The Hit Wizards especially. They might be under a different branch than the aurors, but they are still

members of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Harry knew nothing of Hit Wizards, so he couldn't say anything about them. However...

"What if they're not Hit Wizards working for the Ministry?" he asked.

"There's nothing that says an assassin has to work for the Ministry. I'm betting there's probably a group or individual somewhere who accepts assassination contracts from the darker families."

"I know of a few people who killed others for dark families," Sirius said. "I don't know any names, but my parents would often have people over. Money would exchange hands, and then a few days later, someone who my parents disliked, or someone who had opposed them, would wind up dead."

"I don't deny that there are people who kill for money," Madam Bones said. "However, assassins in the magic world keep their names strictly confidential. I'll have to ask Alistor about it, but my understanding is that not even the families who hire them know the true identities of the people they hire."

Madam Bones stood up, adjusted her monocle, and looked down at them.

"In either event, I came here tonight to inform you of what's happened, since you are involved in all of this. An investigation is underway, but I don't know how much we'll find out. We'll be sure to inform you of whatever we do find, however."

"I would appreciate that," Sirius said.

"Thank you," Harry added.

Madam Bones nodded at them both as he and Sirius stood up. They walked her to the door, which she left from since the fireplace still wasn't connected to the floo network. She bade them both a good night, and then walked off the lawn and disappeared once she'd gone past the wards.

Harry glanced at Siriurs, who stood still and was staring at the place that Madam Bones had left, a strange grimace etched onto his face.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yeah," Sirius said. "I'm just not sure how to feel."

Pettigrew had, at one point, been Sirius's friend. Regardless of what the rat had done, in spite of the bad blood that now existed between them, and despite Pettigrew's betrayal, it did not change the fact that, at some point in time, they had been friends.

Harry could not claim to know what was going through his godfather's mind. How could he? It wasn't like Harry had ever been betrayed before. Even so, he imagined his godfather must have been hurting.

"Say, Sirius," Harry began. Sirius turned him, and Harry, still looking at his godfather out of the corner of his eyes... smiled. "Have you ever heard of Nintendo?"

XoX

"Go, go, go! Hop on the turtle! Hop on the turtle!"

"It's not a turtle, Sirius! It's a Koopa!"

"Whatever. Just hop on it!"

In an effort to cheer up Sirius, Harry had gone out and bought a Nintendo NES and a TV. He'd then asked Kreacher to create an area within the wards that negated magic. Since magic adversely affected machines, he needed an area where there was no magic.

Wards were a complicated field of magic that required nearly a decade of study to master. They were a combination of runes and permanent enchantments. Harry, having never studied wards in depth yet due to not having enough time, couldn't even begin to figure out the wards surrounding Grimmauld Place, which were ancient and complex.

Fortunately, he didn't have to.

One of the benefits to having a house elf was that they were given access to the wards. This was done for multiple reasons. For one, a house elf could not betray their master; loyalty was assured. For another, house elves actually had more raw power than most humans, not to mention an instinctive intimacy with the intricacies of magic that few humans possessed. Where a skilled human could manipulate a ward in minutes, a house elf would only take seconds.

Now, he and Sirius were playing Mario Bros. It was a new game that had just come out this year. Harry really did have to thank Ragnok's people for updating him with knowledge about this gaming system. He was sure this company, Nintendo, would eventually become a major player in the industry of video games.

"Jump! Jump!"

"I am jumping! Shut up and let me play!"

On the screen, a tiny pixelated man in red ran along, leaping over small red goombas and hopping on the shells of koopas, all of it done in search of a princess... who was in another castle.

"What the hell is this?!" Sirius shouted as a small creature with a mushroom head hopped up and down. "We went through all that trouble to rescue the princess, only to discover that she wasn't even there?! I call foul play!"

"You mean I went through all that trouble," Harry corrected. "You have not done anything yet. However, it's your turn now. That was the deal, right? Either one death or one level complete before we switch places?"

"All right! It's my time to shine!" Sirius cheered. "Give me that thingamajig! It's time to show you what I'm made of!"

It was during this time, as Sirius began playing, that the doorbell rang. Since his godfather was preoccupied, Harry stood and wandered toward the door. Professor Lupin was on the other side. Harry blinked.

"Harry," the professor greeted with a tired smile. "Where's Sirius."

"In the living room," Harry answered seconds before a shout of "what the hell are you doing?!" came to them from the living room.

"I see," Professor Lupin said.

Harry chuckled. "It's good to see you, Moony. Why don't you head into the living room. Sirius is currently discovering the joy of video games. I'm sure he'd be thrilled to have you join him on this most auspicious moment."

Professor Lupin snorted to hide his laughter. "I'm sure."

Harry watched as the DADA Professor wandered into the living room. He listened as Sirius bellowed out a greeted so loud that his voice reverberated off the walls.

"Why do you allow such filth into our home, My Lord?" Walburga asked, her tone resentful.

Harry glanced at her. "You served under the Dark Lord decades ago, yes?"

"I did."

"Did you know that the Dark Lord had allied himself with werewolves, vampires, and dementors?" Harry asked. He spread his arms as Walburga recoiled. "The world is not so black and white as you might believe. Our world is one of shades. The Dark Lord knew this, and he used that knowledge to pull wool over the eyes of Britain's noble houses."

"And you seek to do that same?" Walburga asked, frowning.

Harry shook his head. "Rather than pull wool over your eyes, I would see it undone. My goal is not to spread disinformation, but to inform those who are lacking in knowledge the truth about this world, so they can make their own decisions." Harry smiled. "Saying that, I would prefer it if that decision was to follow me, but one cannot always have what they desire."

The portrait frowned, which caused Harry to stifle his chuckle. As master

of the house and one who spoke parseltongue, she gave him preferential treatment. This had allowed him to practice his speeches on her.

After all, if he could convince one such as Walburga to join his cause, then convincing the other dark houses shouldn't prove too difficult.

XoX

Harry woke up early the next day and went for a fifteen kilometer run. He wanted to get a feel for the area, since he was going to be living here for the foreseeable future.

The area surrounding Grimmauld Place was completely different from Privet Drive. Far more industrialized than what he was used to, there were tall buildings all around him, not skyscrapers, but certainly larger than anything found near his old home outside of the library. The ancient house of the Black's was on Eversholt St. and Phoenix Rd.

There weren't many people outside. At the same time, there were far more people than Harry was used to seeing first thing in the morning. An older couple was walking a dog on the other side of the street, several young people strolled past him—college students?—and paused to look at him as he passed. One of the girls in the group whistled, and Harry felt his lips turning into a frown.

It took awhile, but Harry soon discovered a park. Oakley Square Gardens was a small copse of trees next to a triangular shaped section of buildings. Harry stopped there and used this place to do his push ups and other exercises.

By the time he returned home, sweat dripped down his skin, soaking his shirt all the way through and making it cling to him. After grabbing the morning newspaper, he entered Grimmauld Place on silent feet. The portrait of Walburga was sleeping, and so Harry crept past it, wandered into the shower, and cleaned off before getting dressed.

Harry's normal routine when he was home was to make breakfast for the Dursleys. Then he would sit down and have some coffee while reading the newspaper and checking his stocks. Since Kreacher didn't like it when he cooked, Harry didn't make breakfast. He set the morning

newspaper on the table, right next to a letter from Gringotts, which informed him of how his stocks were doing.

Setting aside his stocks for the moment, he picked up the newspaper. It was a mundane newspaper. There wasn't much going on in the mundane world, though it seemed several people had gone missing in London, a couple of older people and a young woman from college. They'd gone missing sixteen miles from the hotel that he'd been staying at during the summer break.

Deciding that there was nothing interesting in the news, he picked up the Gringotts letter and read on how his stocks were doing.

It looks like Microsoft's value is higher than Apple right now.

Feeling the deep frown on his face, Harry tried to determine what the best course of action would be. He could sell his Microsoft stocks now and buy Apple stocks while they were low. However, it looked like Microsoft would still rise a bit more. He wanted to sell and buy when these two companies were at their highest and lowest respectively.

The door to the kitchen opened and Sirius stumbled in. His eyes were still half closed, and he was yawning as he scratched his stomach.

"Morning," he yawned as he slumped onto his chair. A plate filled with a traditional English breakfast appeared before him.

"Good morning, Sirius," Harry said absently as he flipped to the next page.

I'm so glad Ragnok has switched from parchment to paper.

"What's that?" Sirius asked as he stuffed his face with poached eggs.

"My stocks," Harry replied.

"Stocks?"

"The stock market."

"I have no clue what that is."

"I'm not surprised."

"I feel like I've just been insulted."

"And I should care because...?"

Sirius pouted as Harry flipped another page. He blinked at the contents. It looked like Ragnok had found a seller for the basilisk skin. The offer being made was 5,000 galleons per square meter. It was a lot of money. The amount of skin taken from the basilisk, including the shed skin, was about 256.5 square meters.

That's 1,282,500 galleons.

That was a lot of money, and it was only what he would make from the skin.

What am I going to do with all this?

Harry sighed. It looked like he was going to have to speak with a few people.

Flipping to the next page, Harry found the title deed to a small shop located within Diagon Alley. The shop, which was being named *CH Potions*, was not yet open for business. However, it looked like the shop owner was someone that he knew quite well.

So, Cassidy managed to get a licence and is opening the shop? I'll go see her soon.

But first, he needed to do some Christmas shopping.

XoX

CH Potions had been given a prime location. It was two buildings away from *Ollivanders*, making it more visible to the public than the other potion shops. The glass windows were currently covered with a curtain, and there was a sign hanging from the wooden door that said "*not yet*"

open for business."

Harry walked up to the door, knocked once, and then waited to see if someone would answer. There was a pause. Then there was some thumping. Harry heard someone thumping against the door.

"Who is it?" a voice called from the other side.

"Cassidy?" Harry said. "It's Harry."

"Harry!"

The door swung wide open. A woman stood in the doorway.

Cassidy Fergins looked the same as last year. She wore her brown hair in braids, and there were a few strands framing her face. Light brown eyes were widened in surprise. She must not have been expecting him.

She's shorter than me.

He must have grown without realizing it. The last time they met, she'd been taller than him, but now he was a few centimeters taller than her.

"You're... you're here..." Cassidy looked shocked, as though someone had sucker punched her in the face.

"Yeah," Harry said. "I got a letter from Gringotts. They said they found you a place to open shop. Thought I'd check in."

Gringotts normally wouldn't send someone a letter about another person's business. However, Cassidy had gotten her loan through him. The contract that she had signed was one that he'd written up and signed in blood, essentially making them magically contracted business partners.

"I thought you had forgotten about me," Cassidy admitted.

"I'm sorry." Harry ran a hand through his hair. "A lot has happened."

"I know," Cassidy said. "I read the news."

Harry smiled. "There's a lot more that happened that the Daily Prophet didn't cover. However, most of it isn't important. I came because I wanted to see how you were doing, and also..."

Reaching into a pouch at his side, Harry pulled out a spiral bound notebook, which he held out to Cassidy. She took it. There was a curious frown on her face.

"What is this?" she asked.

"These are all my notes on the potions I've modified to be stronger and more effective." Harry watched as she flipped through his notes. "If you want, you and I can schedule some time to go over a few of these."

Cassidy's stunned expression reminded him of someone who'd been shocked with a taser.

"Um, yeah. I-I'd like that. Are you sure you have time?" she asked, coming out of her stupor—at least enough to speak.

"I can make time," Harry said. "This is important. It's not every day you become the shop owner to a potion store."

"Um, thank you," Cassidy said.

An awkward silence befell them. Harry and Cassidy stood there, neither of them saying a thing. Should he say something more to break the ice? Hadn't they already talked, though? The ice should have been broken.

This... this is really awkward.

"Well," Harry coughed into his hand and tried to hide his blush. "I'll, uh, I'll let you get back to it. Good luck with the shop—oh! And let me know if you need any help."

"Thank you, Harry," Cassidy said with a smile.

Harry smiled back and left. That had to have been one of the most awkward meetings in his life.

XoX

Christmas was coming up, and Harry was wondering what he was going to do for it. Certainly, he'd be spending time with Sirius. However, what should he do beyond that? He wanted to do something for his friends, with his friends, but he didn't know what that something was. A party? A small gathering? Would he go to someone else's gathering?

After what happened this summer, would I even be invited?

Harry knew he shouldn't be dwelling on this. He knew it wasn't healthy. On a theoretical level, he understood that what he was doing, wallowing in self-derision over something that everyone else had already forgiven, was not good for him. And yet he couldn't help it.

Having eidetic memory meant that he could never forget anything that happened, no matter how much he might want to. His parents' death, the way he treated the Dursleys when he was younger, Hermione's death, and how he'd treated everyone after that... all the things he wished he could forget would remain with him for the rest of his life. It made forgiving himself difficult.

Sitting at the table in the kitchen, scribbling notes on a notebook, Harry wondered how long it would be before these moments of intense guilt would fully leave him. Awhile, was his guess. Still, he had hope, and he was getting better. He guessed it would just take him longer than most people.

The doorbell rang.

"I'll get it!" Sirius called. Loud thumping reverberated from the hallway. Harry's ears twitched as the door opened and a surprised voice squawked. "C-Celestina!"

Harry blinked. Standing up, he walked out of the kitchen and into the hallway just as Celestina was greeting Sirius.

"Sirius, you look as rakish as ever," Celestina said.

"I do look rather debonair, don't I?"

"I think shabby might be a bit more accurate."

"How harsh."

"Celestina," Harry greeted as he walked into the room. Celestina looked at him. Harry almost-almost-shuddered at the bright smile on her face.

"Harry," she said with a warm smile that sent chills down his spine.

"I'm guessing you're not here to see me," Sirius said.

"You're just a bonus. I'm actually here to speak with Harry."

From what little he knew of Sirius, Harry understood that his godfather was moments away from trying to hit on the woman. Wanting to head that off, Harry said, "Would you like to come into the sitting room, where we can speak in private."

"Private?" Sirius asked. "Are you saying you don't want me there?"

"I think that would be for the best," Celestina admitted with all the primness of a sophisticated noble. "It wouldn't be a good idea to have any dogs sniffing around. You know how they are."

"Willing to hump anything with two legs and a bosom," Harry agreed.

"Oh, very funny, you two," Sirius said. "You're both so hilarious."

The sitting room was one of the new rooms that had come about when Sirius did all of his redecorating. It was a spacious room with soft carpet that sank underneath Harry's feet. The walls were a light cream, but they were tastefully decorated with silver and gold patterns. Bookshelves lined the walls. Most of the tomes that sat on those shelves were the less sensitive books. All of the ones filled with dark magic were in a hidden room that only Harry could access.

As they sat at an intricate glass table, two glasses appeared before them. One of them, a large glass mug, was filled with butterbeer. The other was empty.

"Do you have a preference for your drink?" Harry asked.

"Do you have wine?" Celestina wore a smile as Harry blinked.

"You mean the non-magical drink?"

"Yes."

"White or red?"

"White please."

The moment she asked for white wine, her glass became filled with liquid. Celestina picked up the glass. She lightly swirled the wine, smiled, and then took a sip.

"This is good wine."

"I'm glad to hear that," Harry said. This was the same wine that Selene had made him drink when they'd gone out to eat. Since he didn't know much about wine, he had thought it would be a safe bet.

"I suppose not," Celestina admitted with a wry smile. "How have you been? I did not get many chances to speak with you the other day."

She was obviously referring to when they had arrived on Platform nine and three-quarters. He inferred from her words that she'd been hoping to speak with him. Sirius's presence must have derailed her plan, whatever it was, and now she was coming to coerce him into something.

"I have been well," Harry replied. "Things were hard for a while, but everything has improved since this summer."

"Yes, this summer."

For the first time since they had met, Harry thought he saw remorse in the woman's eyes. It only lasted for a second. Harry blinked and it was gone, making him wonder if it had been a trick of the light.

"Harry, I am sorry about what happened. Blaize told me about Hermione.

It must have been very hard for you."

Harry swallowed the lump that threatened to stilt his speech. He knew platitudes would come eventually, if for no other reason than because people loved to feign sympathy. However, he'd not expected Celestina to show any form of remorse. She'd never seemed like that type to him.

"My son was deeply injured by Hermione's passing," Celestina continued. "It was hard on him, and he had his friends. As I understand it, you had no one to rely on during your time of need."

Shifting in his seat, Harry forced the words out. "It was... trying, I'll admit. However, thanks to Blaize and the others, I was able to move past my grief once I arrived at Hogwarts."

It was not entirely true. He might have moved past his grief, but the guilt he felt from his actions afterward still occasionally clouded him. However, Harry didn't want to tell this to Celestina.

"You mentioned that you wanted to discuss something with me," Harry prompted.

"Yes." Setting her glass down, Celestina gazed at Harry with a knowing expression. "You have not done much this year to expand your influence. While this hasn't necessarily hurt your reputation, and many are now sympathetic toward you because of what happened to Sirius, your position is currently being threatened by several people."

"Such as Lucius," Harry said.

"Such as Lucius," Celestina agreed. "To counteract this, I was thinking you should host your own Yuletide celebration. My son will attend, of course, and I imagine all of your friends and their families will also be there."

There was merit in hosting his own party. Nobles loved to party. It was a great place to solidify alliance, talk politics, and even make backdoor deals if one was bold enough. Her suggestion was a good one, but still...

"Are you suggesting I host a party because doing so will allow you to

showcase the friendship between myself and your son?"

Celestina smiled. "You're a smart boy. That is one reason I am suggesting this. However, that is only part of the reason."

Remaining silent was harder than Harry would have thought. He wanted to ask this woman what the other part was, but at the same time, saying that he wanted to know felt a lot like losing. He refused to lose to anyone.

Her smile glimmering with a sort of deviousness that made Harry think she knew his every thought, Celestina continued. "The other reason is because of you. The ambition burning brightly within you is a rare thing for someone your age, and yet I can already see the results of your ambition in Blaize and your friends. When you come of age, you will bring great change. I would like to align my house to yours so I can be there when you bring about this change."

So that was it. Celestina knew that he wanted to change the wizarding world, believed he had what it took to succeed, and wanted to align herself with him to be there when it happened. It was a rather straightforward reasoning. He was surprised. Given that this woman was a Slytherin, he would have expected something more... subtle.

"Not every scheme needs to be subtle," Celestina said, once again seeming to peer into his mind. "Subtle doesn't always benefit people, least of all the ones that are coming up with the scheme. There are many occasions where it's best to take a straightforward approach."

Harry felt his cheeks growing warm, though he tried to pretend he wasn't embarrassed at being seen through so easily. "Yes, I suppose you have a point."

Leaning forward ever so slightly, Celestina pinned him with her vivid, smiling face. "I don't suppose you'd mind if I offered a few suggestions for your Yuletide celebration, would you?"

"Not at all," Harry said, gesturing for her to continue. It only occurred to him after she started talking that Celestina had successfully coerced him into doing her bidding.

It seems I still have much to learn, he thought while listening to Celestina's suggestions.

XoX

Sirius had been sulking since Celestina came over. The man walked as if in a slump, he spoke in half-hearted grunts, his entire disposition reminded Harry of a child who'd been scolded by his parents. His godfather only acted like himself when the three of them—him, Professor Lupin, and Sirius—were working on the motorcycle.

It was during one of those motorcycle sessions, while he and Professor Lupin stood off to the side as Sirius replaced old parts with new ones, that Harry asked about something that had been bothering him.

"You want to know about the relationship between Sirius and Celestina?" Professor Lupin asked.

"Yes."

Professor Lupin looked up, his eyes gaining a thoughtful glance. "Their relationship is... complicated. I'm sure you already know that arranged marriages aren't unheard of in wizarding society. This is especially true for the Ancient and Noble Houses or the Founding Five Houses like Black, Bones, and Potter. Even today, there are still arranged marriages happening in our world."

"I'm guessing Celestina and Sirius were placed into an arranged marriage with each other?" Harry said.

"You're only half right," Professor Lupin said. "You see, Celestina and Sirius were, I guess you could say they were romantically entangled. Sirius, as you seem to be aware, is something of a playboy. Back at Hogwarts, he would take many women to bed with him. Well, Celestina was the same way when it came to men. There was actually a betting pool between the Marauders to see who among those two would sleep with the most people."

"Uh... that sounds really interesting." Harry thought he might have been turning green. The knowledge of his godfather's promiscuousness was

rather disturbing.

"Anyway, he and Celestina, when they weren't sleeping with other people, would sleep with each other. I'm not really sure about the true nature of their relationship, but they seemed close enough to James and I."

"What does that have to do with them being put into an arranged marriage?"

"Ah, well... their parents eventually decided to arrange a marriage for them when they were still attending Hogwarts. Sirius didn't take it too well and ran away from home. That was actually what led to him being kicked out of the family."

Harry wasn't sure what he should say to that. He hadn't known this part of his godfather's past, and he wasn't sure what to think. Even so, hearing all this did make him curious about the history between Sirius and Celestina. Was there something there? Was Celestina upset that Sirius had run away from the arranged marriage, or was she relieved? He wanted to ask more questions, but he didn't think it would be appropriate.

Everyone has a few skeletons they want to hide.

"Are you two going to keep standing there all day, or are you going to help me?" asked Sirius, snapping Harry and Professor Lupin out of their conversation.

"I guess we should lend him a hand," Professor Lupin said. "Who knows what Sirius might blow up if we're not watching him."

"Right." Harry agreed.

As he and Professor Lupin joined Sirius by the motorcycle, Harry pondered the past surrounding his father's friends.

The life of a Marauder was surely a complicated story.

XoX

Sleepover. It was a new term for Daphne, who'd never heard of it until Susan Bones suggested they have one. According to her, it was originally a muggle term used to describe when a group of friends got together at someone's house and spent the night.

Witches and wizards did not have sleepovers. The act of sleeping over at another's house when you weren't a member of said household was generally reserved for important guests, dignitaries, and political allies. It wasn't something that a group of teenage girls did together for fun.

Thanks to Celestina's blackmail, she and Astoria had been allowed to attend one of these sleepovers. Daphne had no idea what sort of blackmail material Blaize's mum had on her father. However, it must have been significant, something that could destroy everything he had worked toward. Otherwise, there was no way he would have let her and Astoria do as they pleased.

Arriving at Susan's house via floo, Daphne and her sister were greeted by Susan, Hannah, Tracey, and Lisa. The three of them were standing beside Madam Amelia Bones. Daphne found the vision of Madam Bones, known for her professionalism, wearing muggle clothing—jeans and a T-shirt—to be a highly unusual dichotomy with her normal views of the woman. Yet she couldn't deny that the head of the DMLE wore them well.

"Daphne! Stori!" Susan greeted them with a big smile. She and the other girls walked up as they stepped out of the fireplace. "How are you two doing?"

"We're doing great!" Astoria said, beaming at everyone.

"Thank you for having us over," Daphne said.

"Don't mention it." Susan grabbed their hands. "We're glad you could come."

"Daphne!" Tracey leapt at Daphne, who stepped to the side and let her friend plow face first into a wall. "Owch..."

Before anyone else could speak, Madam Bones walked up to them. "Susan, I need to head off to work soon. Why don't you girls go to the

lounge and relax?"

"Okay. Bye, Auntie."

After giving her aunt a hug, Susan lead them to a large room with several comfortable-looking chairs, sofas, and tables. Daphne glanced at the billiards table as they walked past it. Switching her gaze, she noticed the numerous games, both muggle and magical, that were set inside. There was a table for wizarding poker, another that had various muggle board games, and one that she couldn't figure out what it was. All she could tell was that it had a net stretched across the middle.

"This is so exciting," Hannah said, grinning from ear to ear. "We've never had a sleepover with so many people."

"I've never had a sleepover period," Tracey said. Then she paused. "Then again, we did all stay at Blaize's house awhile back. Couldn't that be considered a sleepover as well?"

Hannah shook her head with an emphatic no. "First off, we were with the boys. It's only a sleepover when it's just us girls."

Daphne didn't know about the veracity of that statement, though she did understand the semantics. There were some things that could only be spoken of around other girls.

"But what does one do at a sleepover, I wonder?" Lisa inquired, seemingly to herself.

Susan and Hannah shared a grin.

Sleepovers, as Daphne soon learned, involved a lot of girl talk. They spoke of things like the latest fashion, the latest gossip on various wizarding celebrities, and what boys at Hogwarts they thought was cute.

"Don't tell anyone this, but I actually think Anthony Goldstein is kind of cute," Lisa confessed.

"Anthony?!" Hannah gawked. "Really? I mean, there's nothing wrong with that. He's a good enough guy, but I don't think I would call him attractive."

"Then what boy do you think is attractive?" asked Tracey.

"Oh, well." With her cheeks turning a mild red, Hannah looked down at the table, where a plate filled with scones sat. "Erm... Harry."

"You mean Harry Potter?" Lisa asked. Hannah nodded. "Well, I can't really blame you for that. I think Harry's handsome too, but isn't that kind of obvious? Every girl at Hogwarts thinks he's the hottest thing since before everyone learned that Gilderoy Lockheart was a fraud."

"I suppose that's true," Hannah allowed.

Tracey nodded. "Right. We shouldn't talk about boys who are obviously cute. Otherwise I would've mentioned Blaize."

"And Terry, right?" Lisa teased.

"Wha—no!" Tracey said, her voice almost hotter than her face. "I'd never think that little jerkwad was attractive."

"Sure. Sure. You can keep telling yourself that," Lisa said.

"Denial is an unpleasant thing," Hannah added.

"I am not in denial!"

"So, Tracy likes Terry?" Astoria asked. "I thought it was weird how they were always arguing like an old married couple."

Tracey whirled on Astoria, and, pointing a finger at the girl, shouted, "We do not act like an old married couple! We don't act anything remotely resembling a couple!"

"I'm surprised you know what 'remotely resembling' means," Daphne teased.

"Ugh... uh... shut up, Daph," Tracey moaned. "You're totally killing my vibe here."

As the conversation went from teasing Tracey and back to "the most

eligible bachelor of Hogwarts," Daphne leaned over to Susan. "Speaking of who we all like, did you decide on what we should do about Harry?"

She and Susan had been talking a lot, and their discussions had naturally been about Harry. Daphne had presented Susan with a proposal. She wanted to marry Harry, but thanks to a bunch of ancient laws that the Ministry had never seen fit to change, Daphne could not take on the Potter name. She could either become a second wife or a mistress. Being a second wife would allow her to keep her name, but it meant her firstborn child would also be a Potter. Knowing her father as she did, he would have found that unacceptable. His goal had always been to turn her into someone's mistress.

That said, Daphne didn't care about her title. Her ultimate goal was to get out from under her father's grip, to become free from the influence of her father, and to save her sister from ever having her life controlled by that man. Harry could make that happen.

What's more, Daphne would admit that she liked Harry a lot. She didn't know if she loved him. However, whenever she thought of a life without Harry in it, the pain in her chest was unbearable. He was important to her. If she was going to create a life for herself, then she wanted it to be with Harry.

To that end, Daphne had created a proposal to Susan. She would become Harry's Second Wife. As a Bones, she couldn't become the first wife because she needed to retain her family name. The family name was important in their society, the Bones even more so. As a Founding House, the loss of the Bones family would be an indelible blow. In return for becoming Harry's second wife, she'd help make sure Daphne became his mistress.

"Um... I have thought of it," Susan admitted. "But could you give me some more time?"

Daphne wished she could tell Susan no, that she had to answer now. She couldn't. Unlike her, Susan was not in a hurry to secure her livelihood. She wasn't rushing to attain freedom for herself and her sister, and while Daphne wanted to push her friend into agreeing, she refused to

do that. Doing something like that, forcing her friend into something she might not want, was something her father would do. She wouldn't become like him.

"I understand," Daphne said. She tried not to let disappointment leak into her voice, but it must have shown on her face.

"I'm sorry," Susan said. "I know your circumstances aren't the best."

"It's okay." Daphne sucked in a deep breath, blew it out, and smiled. "Nothing will happen to me or Stori for a while yet. I'm just impatient."

"Hey, what are you two talking about?" asked Astoria.

Daphne smiled and ruffled her sister's hair. "Nothing important."

Astoria frowned, but thankfully for Daphne, Tracey quickly grabbed everyone's attention with her antics.

They went from girl talk to playing games. They played everything from pool to exploding snaps to uno. It was fun. There was also the added benefit of seeing her sister smile. While Astoria smiled a lot, it was rare to see her look so relaxed during the holidays.

Living with their father was like living in a constant, never ending nightmare. Every day Daphne feared for what he might decide to do with her sister. Every day Astoria had to worry about her future. As the second daughter to a prominent neutral dark family, the chances of her being sold off to ally the House of Greengrass with a more powerful house was high. More than anything else, Daphne was afraid of that happening. She was terrified of the knowledge that their father could sign a magical contract that bound her sister to live as someone's mistress, or worse, the chattel of some rich noble.

A loud popping sound to their left alerted everyone to the appearance of a house elf. Daphne was surprised, but she also knew that not all houses treated their elves like they should be invisible. The Bones must have been one of those houses that treated their elves like a part of the family.

"Miss Susan, I have several letters for you and your friends," the house

elf said.

"Oh," Susan sounded surprised. "Thank you."

The house elf handed the letters over to Susan, who flipped through the envelopes before handing each one out to the people they were intended for. There was one for each of them. As Susan handed Daphne the letter meant for her, she glanced at the seal, and, upon recognize the combined crest of Houses Black and Potter, tore it open without a second's thought.

"Dear Daph," she read out loud, smiling at the fluttery feeling the informal greeting invoked within her. "I hope this letter finds you well. It is my honor to invite you to attend a Yuletide celebration on the twenty-third of December. I hope you can attend. Yours truly, Harry."

"I didn't know Harry was going to have a Christmas party," Tracey said.

"I wonder if it was his idea or someone else's?" Lisa inquired. "He does seem the type, but I thought he would have asked us to come personally. He's not the kind of guy who does things without prior planning."

"No, he isn't," Daphne agreed. Someone must have convinced him that a party was a good idea. She didn't know who, but she wasn't going to complain. Any opportunity to spend time with Harry was a good thing.

"Well, it looks like I need a new dress," Tracey said.

"Me too," Hannah added.

"Oh, I'd also like a dress," Lisa said.

"Me four!" Astoria cheered.

Daphne looked at Susan, who looked back. "Think we'll have time for a shopping trip tomorrow?" she asked.

Susan shrugged. "I imagine we will."

"Then I guess that's settled."

Their plans were set, though they would have to get Madam Bones's permission. Daphne wondered if she should get a casual dress or an elegant dress. She didn't know what sort of party Harry was planning, but his mention of Yuletide instead of Christmas informed her that there would likely be politicking.

Elegant it is.

With her decision made, Daphne joined her friends.

The rest of her night was spent gossiping, giggling, and getting into pillows fights until exhaustion claimed her.

XoX

Harry knew it probably wasn't the best idea, but he had sent an invitation to Lisa Crawft, inviting her to the party as well. While he was concerned about someone discovering her non-magical origins, he had his godfather and friends to help him.

The doorbell rang early that morning. When Harry answered the door, Lisa's mother and father were standing behind her. While her mother wore a cardigan and her father a business suit, Lisa was wearing a yellow sundress, but she was also dragging a large suitcase behind her.

"Hey, Harry!" Lisa greeted with a grin.

"Lisa." Harry smiled. "Come on in. Here, let me grab your luggage."

"Oh. Thank you."

Harry grabbed the handle from Lisa. At the same time, he greeted Mr. and Mrs. Crawft. "It's a pleasure to see you both again."

"Likewise. You look a lot happier than you were when you lived with the Dursleys," Mrs. Crawft said. "I'm happy for you."

"Thank you."

"Hey, Harry!" Sirius said as he wandered into the hallway. "Who's at the—

oh." He paused upon seeing Mr. and Mrs. Crawft. "Hello."

Harry almost sighed at seeing Sirius, who wore nothing but an expensive robe and slippers. They were one of his godfather's splurges. The man wore these every morning now. Harry thought the gaudy pink color was ridiculous, but Sirius loved them.

"Mr. Black," Mrs. Crawft sounded like she was trying not to choke on her own spit. Harry understood. That outfit was garish. "It's a pleasure to see you, um, this morning. Please be sure to take care of my daughter."

"Hey, Harry," Lisa whispered into his ear. "Why is your godfather wearing a pink robe?"

"Because he thinks it's manly," Harry whispered back.

"But it's pink!"

"I know."

Sirius didn't seem to realize that Mr. and Mrs. Crawft were staring at his wardrobe. "Don't worry. Harry here is the most responsible kid I know. He'll be sure to take good care of your daughter."

"He'd better," Mr. Crawft mumbled, only to grunt when Mrs. Crawft elbowed him.

"Please be sure to take care of our daughter, Harry," Mrs. Crawft said.

"I will, Mrs. Crawft," Harry said.

"Harry, why don't you take Lisa's luggage upstairs?" Sirius said, then turned to the Crawft parents. "Would you two like a tour of the house?"

Mr. Crawft looked like he was going to say no, but Mrs. Crawft smiled and clapped her hands together. "We'd love to see the place where Harry is now living." She looked at her husband. "Wouldn't we?"

Mr. Crawft grunted. "Sure."

Harry lead Lisa upstairs, giving the portrait of Walburga a sharp glance as he passed, and carrying her luggage over his shoulder. It was heavier than he expected. What did she have in here? Why had she even brought her luggage over?

"Is it just me, or does this hallway look larger than it should?" Mrs. Cawft's voice drifted from below.

"I'm not sure what you mean," Sirius released a nervous laugh. "Anyway, how about I show you the kitchen..."

"So... can I ask what all this luggage is for?" asked Harry.

"Oh, those are my spare clothes and toiletries," Lisa said. "I've also got a dress in there."

"A dress?"

"For the party."

"Ah. Right."

Lisa was going to take part in his party, which he'd committed to on the suggestion of Celestina. While it was illegal for his friend to know about magic, Harry didn't care, and he had a plan to let her get away with it.

"Lisa," Harry grabbed his friend's attention. "We need to come up with your alias for when the party starts."

"Alias?" Lisa questioned.

Nodding, Harry said, "That's right. This party is going to have more people than just my friends. A lot of political figures from the wizarding world will be here, so I need to make sure they don't find out that you're a non-magical person who discovered magic. They'll erase your memory if they do."

Lisa paled as she and Harry entered the hallway. "I don't want that."

"Me neither," Harry said. "Which is why we're going to say that you are

my penpal from the Colonies, and that we became contacts because we signed up for a mundane program where we send letters to each other. You're currently visiting here with your family, and the school you go to is the All-Girls Salem Academy for Witches in West Virginia. Since underage wizards can't use magic, no one will be able to question you on this."

"Um... okay," Lisa agreed.

Harry smiled. "There's no need to be nervous. I'll let my friends know about the alias, so they can help keep your secret."

Lisa nodded. "R-right."

Their footsteps thudded along the hallway. Harry paused in front of a door, and then he frowned as he realized what he was doing. He backtracked their conversation. He went over it again. That was when he realized that something she said didn't make sense.

"Wait. Why did you bring toiletries with you?" Harry asked.

The expression on Lisa's face, which Harry could've sworn all but said, "*Are you kidding me?*" made him wonder if he was missing something.

"Didn't your godfather tell you?" Lisa asked. "I'm spending the rest of Christmas break here."

"Fweh?" was Harry's eloquent response.

XoX

After getting Lisa set up in a room, Harry and Lisa came back down stairs. The Crawfts stayed for a while longer before giving their daughter and Harry a goodbye. Afterward, he asked Lisa to wait for him upstairs. Meanwhile, he dragged Sirius into the kitchen and magically locked the door.

"Sirius, why didn't you tell me that Lisa was staying over?"

Sirius grinned as he sat at the kitchen table. A plate of bacon and the

appeared before him, which he took great relish in munching on. Harry glared at him. His childish godfather was doing this, stretching out the time it took to answer, because he found it fun to mess with him. The jerk.

"Did you like that little surprise?"

"Like it?" Harry growled. "Do you even realize what kind of trouble you're causing for me?"

"I don't see what the big deal is," Sirius said. "You should be happy that your friend is staying over the night. I've given you the perfect opportunity."

"Opportunity?" Harry blinked. "For what?"

His words earned Harry an "*are you an idiot?*" expression from Sirius. "How can you be so dense? I'm giving you the perfect opportunity to make your friend one of your conquests."

"Huh?"

"This is your chance to get some experience with women."

"Uh..."

"I can already tell that she's sweet on you, so making her fall the rest of the way should be easy."

Harry needed several seconds to actually comprehend Sirius's words. His mind simply couldn't fathom them. It was like trying to answer questions like "*what is the meaning of life?*" or "*why can't I find my underwear?*" He simply couldn't wrap his head around it.

When he finally did get it, his face became a furnace of shame. "Sirius..." Harry muttered, his arms shaking. "You are going to regret ever speaking."

He pulled a wand out from beneath his sleeve. Sirius blinked. Then he stood up as Harry pointed the wand at him.

"Now, Harry... what are you doing with that wand? Surely you can't be thinking of using magic. It's illegal."

"Oh, don't worry." Harry smiled. "I'm using my mother's wand. The Ministry won't even know I'm using magic. Now be quiet and take your punishment like the dog you are."

Sirius never stood a chance. Half an hour later, Lisa would come down and ask Harry about all of the screaming she'd heard.

And that's a wrap. The plot thickens. Who killed Pettigrew? What sort of Yuletide party is Harry going to have? What will I have for breakfast this morning? These questions and more will be answered in the next chapter... except for that last one. None of you will know what I'm eating for breakfast. ^_^

Trials of a Teenage Wizard

Chapter 16

The Trials of a Teenage Wizard

Getting ready to host a party took a lot of work. There was decorating the house, determining what meals should be prepared, getting outfitted in a wardrobe fit for the occasion, and helping his friend choose a suitable gown.

The first few problems were easy, as Harry had Professor Lupin and Kreacher to help. Sirius could have helped too. However, Harry wasn't sure he trusted that old dog not to do something potentially disastrous for his own amusement. That was why, while Professor Lupin spent time decorating Grimmauld Place and Kreacher prepared the meals down to his exact specifications, Sirius was running errands.

His godfather might have grumbled about being worked like a dog, but Harry knew that Sirius was pleased to be doing something, as the smile he'd been wearing hadn't left his face. It really must have been tough on him, being locked up in Azkaban. That was another reason why Harry had tasked Sirius with running around London and Diagon Alley to gather supplies.

Of course, there was another reason why he'd had Sirius out of the house.

"I'm not sure I understand," the portrait of Walburga said. "Are mudbloods not the enemy? If we let them into our society, they will ruin everything."

While Harry wasn't the only person currently in the house-Lisa was also there-his guest was still asleep. Really, that girl could be so lazy. He couldn't complain, though. This would suit his purposes just fine.

"Only if you let them," Harry replied. "You see, the issue between purebloods and those who come from a non-magical background is that

we don't understand each other. The purebloods don't try to teach those who come from the mundane world, and the ones who come from a mundane background don't bother learning about our society because they think they know better."

Harry had been doing this from the moment he'd come to Grimmauld place, slowly subverting the beliefs of Walburga's portrait. Every day he spent his mornings slowly trying to broaden her understanding. She was, in all regards, the greatest test subject he could have asked for; stubbornly clinging to her opinions.

"However, that is why it is up to us to help them see the light," Harry continued. "As members of an ancient and noble house, of a founding house, we are duty bound to help those who come after us understand our culture. In doing so, we indebt those we aid. They'll be grateful to us for showing them the correct path, which strengthens our position in society."

Walburga's cupped her chin and frowned. "So you are saying that we make the mudbloods indebted to us by teaching them. By doing that, we become more powerful."

Harry didn't like how Walburga used the term mudblood. It wasn't just because it was derogatory. It was a banal insult used by purebloods who lacked originality and could only spout the same vitriolic tirade of their forefathers. How could he ever bridge the barrier between purebloods and first generation witches and wizards if they were too busy spewing this sort of tripe? Still, he put up with it, for now. There was little to be done but slowly change the opinions of those who saw people like Hermione as blights on society.

"That's exactly it," Harry said. "However, we need to go even beyond that. You see, by teaching those from a non-magical background, we also expand our own knowledge of those who can't use magic."

Walburga's eyes widened. "Know thy enemy..."

Harry wanted to moan in frustration. This wasn't a matter of knowing the enemy, because there was no enemy to know. He knew that saying something wouldn't change Walburga's ideas on the non-magical

community, however. That was why he kept quiet.

The doorbell suddenly rang, bringing an end to their conversation. Harry went over to the door and opened it. Andromeda Tonks stood on the other side.

"Harry," Andromeda said with a smile. "I'm glad to see that you are well, though I'm disappointed you haven't come to visit me."

Withholding his wince, Harry bowed in apology. "I'm sorry. I meant to, but so much has happened lately that I haven't had the time."

"I am just teasing you, dear," Andromeda said, waving away his apology. "In truth, I am just glad that you saw fit to invite me over so I could help. I am pleased that you haven't forgotten about me, and I'm looking forward to seeing my cousin again."

"I have him out of the house right now," Harry admitted. "I was hoping to surprise him."

"Indeed."

"Why don't you come in?" Harry suggested, stepping to the side and allowing Andromeda to proceed him.

"Thank you."

When Andromeda entered the room, Walburga's portrait followed her like a hawk. Andromeda frowned at it but said nothing. After closing the door, Harry lead her into the kitchen, where they sat down as two cups of freshly brewed tea appeared before them.

"I'm surprised that Walburga didn't say anything after I entered," Andromeda finally said.

"I have her on orders to remain silent when we have guests over," Harry admitted. "They're magically binding, so she can't speak even if she wanted to."

"I didn't know you could do that."

"Since portraits are magical, they can be bound by magical contracts- provided you can trick them into it." Wanting to switch gears, Harry changed the subject. "I'm guessing you know why I invited you here?"

Andromeda nodded. "You mentioned something about a party in your letter."

"Right. The party is tonight. You and your family are invited, naturally. However, I was also hoping you'd be able to help me find my friend a dress suited to a function of this nature."

"Oh? Does that mean we're going shopping?" Andromeda asked, her lips curling into a smile.

"Yes," Harry responded. "Yes, it does."

XoX

After waking up Lisa, Harry introduced her to Andromeda, who'd studied the girl's appearance as a jeweler might diamonds. Lisa had been shivering as the woman looked her over from head to toe. Harry would have laughed, but he understood how most people were uncomfortable being looked at like they were an item at a street vendor stall.

"I think I know the perfect outfit for her," Andromeda had declared, and with those words, they were off.

Lisa had never apparated anywhere. It was only natural, then, that the act made her sick. Second-hand apparition was a terrible sensation. The feeling of your body being compressed like you were being squeezed through a tube sucked. That was why Harry much preferred apparating himself.

"You okay?" Harry asked as he rubbed Lisa's back. She was dry heaving on the concrete walkway, in front of the Leaky Cauldron. He supposed it was a good thing she hadn't just vomited.

"D-do I look okay?" Lisa asked.

"Not really, no."

"Th-there is... your answer."

Andromeda hummed as she stared down at Lisa. "Is this your first time apparating?"

"Y-yes..."

"How odd. I had not realized that. Most children your age have already apparated with their parents at least once. If I had known, I would have tried to ensure the ride was a bit more comfortable."

Groaning, Lisa mumbled, "I don't see how anything so unpleasant could be comfortable."

Andromeda didn't know that Lisa wasn't a wizard, which was another contributing factor to Lisa's discomfort. Under age witches and wizards were protected. While they were not allowed to use magic, their magic protected them from a good portion of the apparating process. It formed a thin aura around the witch or wizard's body, shielding them. Mundane people didn't have that protection.

Using a mild healing charm to help his friend feel better, Harry pulled Lisa to her feet. He also channeled some magic through their hand contact. It was another charm. *Visus*. A charm of magical sight that allowed one to see that which was hidden by magic. It only worked on mild charms, such as the one hiding The Leaky Cauldron from mundane people. Lisa's eyes widened when she saw it.

"Come along, you two," Andromeda said, leading the way into the bar.

Watching his friend's expression as they entered The Leaky Cauldron was a sight indeed. Lisa's eyes became the size of discuses. She craned her neck around, as if attempting to take in everything at once. Harry understood her awe. He'd felt something similar his first time coming to this place—well, before he had been mobbed by all those people. He still shivered thinking about how everyone had crowded around him.

Andromeda knew of what had happened. She also knew that he didn't like unnecessary attention. After greeting Tom the barkeep, she led him and Lisa through the bar and into Diagon Alley.

"W-whoa..." Lisa muttered.

Harry grinned. "Pretty amazing, right?"

"Yeah." Lisa nodded. "I know you told me about it before... but seeing it and hearing about it are two different things."

Lisa gawked at the myriad of stores and magical happenings to be found in Diagon alley. She was like a child seeing a movie for the first time. Her head swiveled as if it was on a spoke, glancing at the potions shops, *Ollivanders*, and the broom shops that sat near the entrance. As she did, Andromeda studied her with a frown.

"Do they not have something like this in the Colonies?"

That was the alias that Harry had come up with. Lisa was a penpal from the United States, who was visiting here to learn more about Great Britain's magical culture. Of course, he would be telling Andromeda the truth soon, but he needed to have her swear to secrecy, especially given the nature of this secret.

For now, however, they needed to get Lisa appropriate clothing for a party-and there was no better place to get clothing than *Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions*.

The door chimed as they entered the modest looking shop. There weren't many people inside, just a small family of four surveying the fabrics. With Lisa's hand still in his, he pulled the girl along, not wanting her to look so surprised someone might discern her origins.

"Try not to look so shocked," Harry said. "It will seem suspicious."

"Well, sorry for not being used to any of this magic crap," Lisa whispered back. "It's not like I've known about magic for long."

Harry sighed. "I'm aware, but you should try to at least look like you're used to magic. We can't pretend you don't know what magic is since you're the same age as me."

"I know that, but you can't expect me to be as calm as you."

"I guess not. Look, just do your best."

Madam Malkin was seeing to a customer when they entered, a little girl who reminded Harry of the woman checking out the fabric. They were probably mother and daughter. Her helper, the Hufflepuff that Tracey had inadvertently insulted before the start of their first year at Hogwarts, was helping the parents look at the fabrics.

"I'll be right with you three once I finish this young one," Madam Malkin said.

"Don't worry," Harry replied. "We can wait."

Harry escorted Lisa around the clothier shop as Madam Malkin and her aide helped the other customers. As they walked, he quietly informed Lisa about the myriad of different fabrics they used to create their clothes. Since all this was new, and quite a few of those fabrics sounded magical, for lack of a better term, she was quite excited.

Andromeda followed a few paces behind. She kept a close eye on them. There was a smile on her face. Harry was sure that she had already figured out who Lisa was, or rather, what Lisa wasn't. However, just like the consummate professional that she was, she said nothing.

"Sorry for the wait," Madam Malkin said after she had finished measuring the girl. "What can I do for you... oh, my. Mr. Potter. I hadn't realized you were one of my customers today."

With something of a deprecating smile, Harry shrugged and said, "I didn't initially plan on it, but I found myself in need of your assistance. I would like you to make my friend here a dress from your finest stores of acromantula silk." Reaching into his robes, he pulled out a sheet of parchment and handed it to Madam Malkin. "Please use that as a reference."

One look at the parchment was enough to make Madam Malkin's eyes widen. A smile quickly appeared on her face. She rolled up the scroll, looked back at Harry, and said, "I can certainly craft something of this nature, but first, I'll need your friend's measurements."

The measuring process was just as laborious and annoying for Lisa as it was for Harry when he first had his measurements taken. On the other hand, he rather enjoyed watching Lisa as she squirmed, complained, and yelped when her squirming caused her to get poked. Lisa saw his smile and started yelling at him. Of course, that only caused her to get poked even more.

It was going to be a very discomfited Lisa who arrived home later that day.

XoX

Madam Malkin had told Harry that it would take her two days to prepare the dress for Lisa. That was fine with him. The party wouldn't be for another two days, on the 25th of December.

They arrived back at Grimmauld Place via apparition once more, and this time, Lisa didn't dry heave, though she still looked sick. Upon entering the house, they moved to the living room. Andromeda took a chair while Lisa and Harry sat on the couch. She gave them both an amused yet strained smile.

"You aren't Harry's penpal from the Colonies, are you?" she asked at last.

"Urk!" Lisa choked on her own spit. "W-what are you talking about? Of course I-"

"Sorry, but there's no point in lying to me," Andromeda said. She took out her wand. While Lisa tensed, Harry just sighed. "I swear on my magic that I shall not reveal the secrets the two of you divulge to me." There was a flash of light, and then a strange hum that rent the air. Andromeda lowered her wand. "There. Now will you tell me the truth?"

"Uh..."

"It's fine, Lisa," Harry said. "I was going to tell her eventually."

"You were?"

"Yes. We need people who can help us, and Andromeda is my barrister.

There's no one better to entrust this secret to than her."

"You flatter me," Andromeda said with a smile.

Lisa gawked. "Didn't know you had one of those."

"Well, I do."

Andromeda chuckled at the two of them. "You were waiting for a good time to get that magical oath from me, right? So, who is this girl? Judging from how unused to apparition she is, I'm guessing she's a muggle."

Again with the muggle...

"Yes, she's an ordinary human," Harry said. "Lisa was the first friend I ever made-no." He shook his head. "She's one of the few people I've ever been able to call a friend."

Lisa's cheeks flushed. "H-Harry?!"

Looking back and forth between the two, Andromeda said, "It looks to me like you're more than just friends."

While Lisa's cheeks turned a shade of red he rarely saw, Harry tried to ignore the fluttering in his chest. He'd have liked to deny her accusations. He would have liked to claim that Lisa was like a sister to him. Yet the truth of the matter was different; he hadn't been able to see her as a sister for awhile now.

That bothered him. He didn't want things to change between him and Lisa. There was no telling what would happen if they did, what would become of her, and also, there was Daphne to think about. He still hadn't been able to figure out what his feelings were for her. This wasn't even going into the political ramifications that this whole mess could cause.

Even though Daphne would never be able to claim the position as someone's wife-at least, so long as she wanted to keep her family name-if he did decide to marry her, then taking Lisa as his first wife, or even his second, would cause problems. Political problems. Not only would it be a blow to his reputation in the wizarding world, but it would jeopardize

Daphne's position. To have a non-magical person take the position of wife was like a slap to the face in magical society.

There was also Nathaniel Greengrass to think about. There was no way a man like that would allow Daphne to marry someone who married a mundane human. Of course, all this was going off the assumption that he would marry Daphne. He still wasn't sure if that was the best option.

"I won't lie and say we aren't close," Harry said. "Lisa is probably the person I'm closest to. However, that's not the issue right now."

"I suppose not." Andromeda shifted, crossing her left leg over her right. "You told a muggle about magic, thereby breaking the law. If you were anyone else, I would've reported you. However, since it's you, I know you must have a reason for it."

Harry shook his head. "There's no great reason this time. I just didn't want to keep lying."

"I see." Andromeda raised an eyebrow. "Well, in that case, why don't you tell me what you want?"

"I'd like you to help me keep this a secret. I've created the alias that Lisa is a penpal who's attending Salem's Witch Academy. To that end, I need someone who can help teach her a bit about our world so she's not floundering whenever something magical happens in front of her."

"Oi! You make it sound like I'm an invalid or something," Lisa complained.

"When it comes to magic, you might as well be."

Lisa's shoulders slumped. "Y-yeah, but you don't have to say it like that..."

"I can help teach her what she needs to know," Andromeda said. "However, understand that my time is limited. You're not my only client, even if you are my best client. In fact, if we weren't related, I'd never do this for you."

Harry nodded. "I understand. I hear you've been busy since our lawsuit."

"I've been extremely busy," Andromeda corrected. "Making sure all of the companies we filed a lawsuit against pay our reparations, dealing with the various factions, weeding out people who try to skim money off us, and trying to determine which new clients to accept has been exhausting."

Ever since the lawsuit, *Tonks & Tonks* had become the number one barrister group in Great Britain. Even people outside of Britain had been coming to have Andromeda work for them. While the popularity gained from Harry's lawsuit was good for publicity, the truth of the matter was that having so many people wanting her to work for them meant she spent less time working and more time sifting through potential customers. It had to be annoying.

"Have you thought of hiring some aids?" asked Harry.

"I have, and there are even a few people I'm looking at. However..."

"However, you'd have to bring them into the fold," Harry deduced.

"Yes," Andromeda said.

Lisa stared at them both. "I don't get it. What are you two talking about?"

"Legal matters," Harry said. "Anyway, Andromeda, I was wondering if you'd like to stay for dinner? I think it would be a nice surprise for Sirius if he could see his cousin again."

"I don't mind staying, but do you mind if I invite Nymphadora and Ted?" she asked.

"I don't have a problem with that," Harry said. "Though you'll want to be careful of the portrait. She's got no choice but to keep quiet, however, I'm not sure how Walburga will respond to Ted's presence."

He might have been able to keep a tight leash on Walburga's portrait thus far, but he still had a long way to go before she would accept all of his beliefs. That was another reason he'd been careful about where he let Lisa's secret out. He didn't want that portrait discovering that Lisa wasn't a witch.

Andromeda smiled. "Don't worry. I know how to deal with a portrait."

XoX

It turned out, dealing with a portrait meant casting a silencing charm on it. Harry had been correct when he assumed Walburga's portrait would not like seeing Ted Tonks. She might have put up with Andromeda for Harry's sake, but the bad blood between her and Ted, a "mudblood," was too much for her right now. Not even his magic had been able to stop her from going off. Perhaps with time, that would change-no, he would make her change. For now, however, this was necessary.

"It's good to see you again, Mr. Tonks," Harry said as he greeted the man with a handshake.

"The pleasure's all mine," Ted replied.

Unlike Andromeda, who he had worked with a lot before disappearing, Harry rarely saw Ted Tonks, except for when he had come over for dinner. Ted was also a barrister, and while he wasn't as popular as Andromeda, he had no shortage of customers.

Ted was a fairly large man with an average appearance. He had brown hair, brown eyes, and a regular build with a bit of a gut. Looking at him next to Andromeda was disparaging. While he felt bad for thinking so, some part of him couldn't help but wonder what someone as gorgeous as Andromeda saw in Ted Tonks. Saying that, the man was affable, kind hearted, and a good man. Perhaps that was it.

"Nymphadora isn't here," Harry noted. "I guess she's working?"

"Yes," Ted said. "Something big has happened over at the Ministry, so she's been pulling several all nighters lately."

It must have been Pettigrew's murder. That was the only thing he could think of that would cause Madam Bones to make her aurors stay late. No doubt they were doing everything in their power to discover the killer.

I wish I could help.

Sadly, not even being the Boy-Who-Lived gave him permission to help in an investigation like this. All he could do was sit tight and wait.

I hate waiting.

Harry coughed into his hand. "Let's not stand on ceremony. Come into the living room and I'll get us some tea."

The living room's decorations were only half-finished. It had been expanded to about three times its original size, and there were several tables that had been set up. Streamers that represented every color of the four Hogwarts Houses hung from the ceiling, creating long loops, which would change color every five seconds. He still needed to decorate the walls, but he planned on finishing that up tomorrow.

"Mr. Tonks, please allow me to introduce my friend, Lisa," Harry said with a gesture. "Lisa, this is Ted Tonks, Andromeda's husband and the second barrister for *Tonks & Tonks*."

Lisa wiped her hands on her pants and tried to curtsy. "Uh, it's very nice to meet you, sir."

"A pleasure to meet you as well," Ted Tonks said.

Tea was served by Kreacher, who remained invisible even now. Harry spoke with Andromeda and Ted while Lisa quietly sat beside him. She seemed nervous, or perhaps she didn't know what to say. Harry supposed he could blame her. All of this was pretty new to his friend, who'd never once had to deal with adults in this manner.

"I've heard about everything that's happened," Ted Tonks said at some point while they were all sitting around a table. "I know you've probably grown sick of hearing everyone offer you false platitudes, but I am sorry to hear about what happened to your friend. I can only imagine how hard that must have been."

Ted was right. Harry had grown tired of hearing platitudes like this. At the press conference, everyone and their mother had been offering him their "heartfelt apologies," but it was obvious to him that none of them actually cared that Hermione had died.

A part of him hated those people for it. How dare they give someone false sympathies. How dare they pretend to care. Yet that was human nature. Humans always liked to feign a sympathy they didn't feel, and Harry couldn't condemn other people for doing something that he had done himself.

"No, it wasn't easy," Harry said. "However, it's all in the past. Let's not dredge up what happened in the past."

They moved onto other topics, talking until Sirius and Professor Lupin came back carrying loads of party supplies. Sirius had taken one look at Andromeda. Then he'd dropped everything he was carrying, raced up to the woman, and pulled her into a hug of gargantuan proportions.

"Hahaha! I'm so glad to see you, Andy!"

"I'd be more glad to see you if you'd put me down!"

"Not a chance!"

Lisa and Harry watched as a laughing Sirius spun Andromeda around like she was a child. The grin on his face was miles wide, practically splitting his face from ear to ear. Sirius really did look like a kid when he was excited like this.

"Harry?" Lisa said.

"Yes?"

"Is your godfather crazy?"

"Probably."

Professor Lupin walked over to Ted Tonks and greeted the man with a firm handshake. They spoke like old friends, which made sense. They had gone to school together, though Ted was a few years older than Sirius and Professor Lupin. That hadn't stopped him from being pranked. According to his dad's stories, Ted was not only one of the people they pranked the most, but it was thanks to Sirius that he and Andromeda had gotten together.

"I'm glad to see life's been going well for you," Professor Lupin was saying. "It looks like you've been pretty successful."

"We've been doing well for ourselves, maybe even a little too well recently," Ted admitted.

"I have heard that your company has received a lot of attention as of late."

"It's true."

Harry stopped focusing on the adult's conversation to look at his friend. Lisa was frowning, and her shoulders were slumped with a sort of forlornness. He frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"It's nothing," Lisa said, shaking her head. "It's just... seeing you talk with those two about so many adult things really makes me realize how different we are." She looked down at her cup of tea. Her face was set in a grimace. "I've always known that you were calm and cool and mature, but I don't think I ever realized how much more... like an adult you were. It's kind of funny. You call me your best friend, but I feel like I barely know a single thing about you."

"You shouldn't say things like that," Harry muttered. "You might not know everything, but it's not like you know nothing-and you're learning a lot more about me. If anyone is to blame for you not knowing stuff, it's me. I'm the one who kept you in the dark for so long. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I know you couldn't say anything."

While they both understood the situation, it didn't make what was happening any better. Harry was beginning to realize something. He and his friend had been drifting further and further apart the more involved he became with the wizarding world.

However, Harry didn't want that to happen anymore. He didn't know what he felt for Lisa. He didn't know what he should be feeling. The only thing he knew was that she was important to him, and he didn't want to give

her up. Not for the wizarding world. Yet there were only a few ways to bridge the gap that separated them.

And Harry didn't know if he could commit to any of them.

How troublesome.

XoX

Two days passed by more quickly than Harry had expected. Perhaps it was because he had been so busy; he'd gone shopping with Lisa and Sirius, finished decorating for the party, helped Sirius and Professor Lupin with the motorcycle, worked on his own projects, and spent whatever free time remained with Lisa. He'd done a lot in just two days. That probably explained why he slept in on the day of the party.

Waking up in bed, Harry did all of the things that he normally did. He exercised, refreshed himself and got dressed, and then spent the morning reading the news and checking his stocks before everyone else woke up.

It looks like three more people have gone missing in London...

"G'morning, Harry," Lisa said as she stumbled into the kitchen and plopped down at the table. Breakfast appeared before her. It was a testament to how used to magic she'd become that she didn't even blink. The first time food appeared before her like that, she'd shrieked her head off and started blabbering about ghosts and curses.

"Morning." Harry slid a warm drink over to her. It was his rejuvenation beverage, which he made for Tracey every morning at Hogwarts. This one had been modified for non-magical consumption. "Drink up. That'll wake you up."

Lisa did as told, taking a huge gulp from the cup. Her body perked up, straightening almost like her spine was snapping into place, and her ears turned bright red as steam wafted from them.

"Whoa..." she muttered. She took another sip. "This is some strong stuff."

"It should be," Harry said. "I made that drink especially for you."

"Is that so?" Lisa mumbled as she took another sip, this one much longer than the last. Her ears were still red for some reason.

Huh, the physical effects should have worn off after the first sip.

Sirius and Professor Lupin came down next. Both of them were tired, but Harry had prepared drinks for them as well. Professor Lupin was impressed. He asked Harry about the rejuvenation potion, to which he and his dark arts professor discussed throughout breakfast, much to the displeasure of Lisa and Sirius.

"It's like listening to a couple of nerds," Lisa said, wrinkling her nose.

"I don't know what a nerd is, but I agree," Sirius added before attempting to change to subject. "So, the party is today."

"That's right," Harry said. "Tonight, to be specific."

"What time are your friends coming over?" asked Professor Lupin.

"Early this afternoon," Harry answered.

"Then we still have some time to do some last minute preparations."

"Right."

After breakfast, Harry had Sirius and Professor Lupin help him finish the decorations. Lisa sat on the couch and watched as they swished and flicked their wands, moving furniture around and creating streamers that went along the walls and ceiling. She was pouting.

"You know, as a teacher, I really should report you for using underage magic," Professor Lupin said.

"But you won't," Harry shot back. "After all, no good Marauder would rat out their friend's child."

"He's got you there," Sirius said as he slashed his wand, creating a spray

of what appeared to be paint. However, rather than splash everywhere, it stopped mid-air and began floating like bubbles, which then shifted and changed colors as they bobbed around the room like they were caught on zephyrs.

"You have your father's mischievous side and your mother's brain," Professor Lupin spoke with a sigh. He flicked his wand. Streamers shot from the tip. "A dangerous combination, to be sure."

"I wish I could use magic like you guys," Lisa pouted. "It's not fair."

"Don't be too upset, little lady," Sirius said. "It'll give you wrinkles."

Lisa's response was to pout some more.

It took about an hour to finish decorating. Lunch was ready by the time they were finished, and after lunch, the group went into what was now being called the game room. It was basically just a small room that negated the house's magic. There they played various Nintendo NES games until Harry's friends arrived.

"I'm glad all of you could make it," Harry said as he exchanged greetings, hugging Daphne, Susan, Hannah, and Lisa, and slapping backs with Blaise and Neville and Terry.

"We wouldn't miss this," Tracey said, grinning.

"A party thrown by Harry Potter? Definitely not," Hannah added.

"Astoria and I were looking forward to it," Daphne said.

"I was not," Astoria complained, crossing her arms and huffing.

"Of course not," Daphne said with a conciliatory smile.

They had come with their parents, who'd also been invited. Fortunately, after the obligatory greeting, Sirius and Professor Lupin took the adults into another room where they could "adult" and let the kids do as they pleased. Harry could hear bits and pieces of their conversation through the walls.

"Oh, dear, I had not realized you would be here. Shouldn't you be at home, in bed. It can't be healthy for someone who's so decrepit to leave her room often."

"Shouldn't you be out plotting to murder your next husband?"

"I'm not sure of who to marry yet, so no."

Sounds like Celestina and Augusta are arguing...

"Come on, you guys," Lisa said, grabbing Daphne by the hand and pulling her up the stairs. "You guys have to play the Nintendo with us!"

"Nintendo?" Blaize questioned with furrowed brows.

Harry grinned. "I bet you guys are going to love the Nintendo. Just be sure not to use magic around it, okay?"

It turned out, they did love the Nintendo NES. After their initial shock, which involved them gawking like mundane children who'd just seen their first magic trick, the group had really gotten into playing. Oddly enough, the one who Harry had expected to get the most into-Tracey-was not the one who liked it the most.

"Come on! Come on, Mario! Jump! Don't let that stupid turtle get you!" Blaize shouted as he played his turn. He was doing pretty well for someone who'd never played. He had already beaten the first castle. Harry was impressed. "Don't think I'm going to let you strange red mushrooms beat me!"

Terry and Neville were sitting next to Blaize as he played. They were staring at the screen like zombies, with their mouths wide open and their eyes glazed over. Harry wondered if showing them Mario was a good idea.

"I'm not sure letting them play that was a good idea," Daphne said, unknowing parroting his thoughts.

"I'm beginning to think you're right," Harry said.

"I want to play too," Tracey mumbled, her longing stare locked onto the screen.

"You can play if you want to," Harry said.

"Oh, no," Daphne interrupted before Tracey could cheer. "If Tracey started playing, she'd never stop, and then we'd have to pry her away and it would take hours. No thanks. We're going to have to get ready for the party soon anyway."

Harry blinked. "But the party isn't for another three hours."

Daphne, Susan, Hannah, both Lisas, and even Tracey stared at him like he was stupid.

"Us girls need time to get ready," Lisa Turpin said.

"A lot of time," Hannah added.

"In fact, we should probably start getting ready right now," Daphne began. "It's going to take at least an hour to do our make up."

Harry didn't get it. He knew women took longer than men to get ready. Lisa took at least an hour longer than him to get ready for school, but he thought three hours was excessive. That didn't mean he was going to argue with them.

"In that case, you may want to pry Astoria away from the Nintendo. It looks like she somehow got ahold of the controller."

"What?" Daphne blinked, looked at her side, blinked again, and then swiveled her head toward the TV. Astoria was, indeed, sitting with Blaize and the other guys, controller in hand and fingers tapping away at the buttons. "Stori! We're supposed to be getting ready for the party soon."

"But Daph, I just started playing! Let me play for a little longer!"

"Absolutely not. You have to get ready for the party."

"But the party isn't for another three hours!"

That's what I said.

"Yes, and that's barely enough time for me to do your hair, your makeup, and put your outfit on-not to mention my own outfit. There's a lot that we need to do."

"B-but this game is so fun!"

"You can play it later, Stori."

As everyone watched the two sisters bicker, Tracey saddled up to Harry, a wide grin splitting her face. "Are you as amused by these two as I am?"

Harry took one look at the two sisters. Daphne had grabbed Astoria's hand and was trying to drag the girl away, but the younger of the two had had a strong grip carpet and was refusing to budge.

He looked back at Tracey.

"Yes," he admitted. "Yes, I am."

XoX

The party had started, but the girls had yet to come down. Harry didn't want to say he was getting worried, but, well, he wouldn't deny that he was curious. He understood that girls took longer to get ready than boys, but what could they possibly be doing that it would take over five hours to get ready? He and the other boys had been ready for the party when it started! And they hadn't gotten dressed until the party was half an hour away!

There were a lot of people at this party, more than even he had expected-far more.

Harry had left the matter of sending out invitations to Celestina and Augusta Longbottom. Despite how they didn't get along, both had somehow come to an agreement on who to send letters to. Now there were over fifty people inside of Grimmauld Place's living room.

Being the host-technically, Sirius was the host, as this yuletide festival

was "in celebration of his release"-Harry had been making his rounds around the party. He'd met with all the movers and shakers. He spoke with the fringe families and light families. He rubbed elbows with the darker families that had come at Celestina's behest, while sharing laughs and smiles with those who lived in the light as Augusta wanted him to.

Just as Augusta had introduced him to some of the light families that he didn't know, so, too, had Celestina helped him with the darker families. There were several. The McNaivers were distant relatives of the Notts. There was also the Ashwoods, a dark family who had immigrated from Germany. There were many people, and thanks to his eidetic memory, Harry had made sure to memorize every new face he saw.

Professor Lupin and Sirius were also there, making friendly. Professor Lupin had tried to leave before the party started. However, neither he nor Sirius were going to let him. They had immobilized Professor Lupin before he could make off, stuffed him into a suit, and then kept him frozen until it was time for the party to start. The werewolf had sulked for a while, but even he couldn't stay upset as Sirius dragged him around the room.

It looks like they know a lot of these people.

While some people were still wary of Sirius, shown by the way they grew silent when he approached, it didn't take long before many of them were animatedly chatting with him. Sirius had a way with people. He was so upbeat, always smiling and laughing. It was hard for someone to remain suspicious in the face of such gaiety.

Andromeda, Ted, and Nymphadora were also present. While Andromeda was decked out in a lovely dress that flattered her womanly figure, Ted had donned his best business suit and Nymphadora had... well, at least she was wearing a dress. That said, she picked at her dress every few seconds, as though longing to be rid of it. This forced Andromeda to slap the girl's hands, even as she politiced with several other guests.

All of his male friends were also present. Blaize moved with his mum and Celine, his flirty older sister who occasionally threw Harry winks. Neville made rounds with his gran. Terry had looked completely out of his

element-until Harry had introduced him to Andrew Fulton, a wizarding astronomer who studied the magical theory of star-based rituals. He'd been speaking with the man ever since.

As he was talking to Emily Smith, discussing the latest in magical medicine, the doors to the living room opened... and Harry finally understood what had taken the girls so long to get ready.

They were breathtaking. Harry wasn't the only one who was stunned as they walked into the room. Blaize, Terry, and Neville looked like they'd been hit by a stunner, and some of the guests who were around their age appeared similarly struck dumb. There were even some older witches and wizards who eyed the group of seven, though Harry did not approve of the stares. It was like they didn't see the girls in question. It was more like they were judging the girls' worth, as if they were a source of monetary gain instead of people.

Begging off his conversation with the mediwitch, Harry made it to the girls before anyone else. He greeted them with a smile.

"You girls look stunning," he said. "I think you've just left the entire room speechless."

"As well we should," Tracey said, turning her nose up in the approximation of a snobby noble. "My beauty has clearly left them in a state of stupification."

"Such a humble girl you are," Daphne said with a sigh.

"What do you think of my dress, Harry?" Lisa Crawft asked as she twirled around, allowing the elegant folds of her golden dress robes to shimmer and ruffle. It was a single-shoulder dress, the kind that resembled those worn by Hollywood actresses. Harry had designed the dress based on one that he'd seen being worn by Meg Ryan.

"You look even lovelier than I imagined you would," Harry said honestly.

Lisa's entire face turned red. "Ah... t-thank you."

"You look pretty dashing yourself, Harry," Hannah said, her voice as

bubbly as her stunning yellow dress, which swished as she walked.

Harry grinned. "Thanks. I do look rather dashing, don't I?"

"It seems Tracey isn't the only humble one here," Susan joked. With a dress the same color as her hair, she walked up to him. Harry held out his arm, allowing her to slide her arm through. She was wearing white silk gloves, which moved up to her forearms. Her dress was sleeveless.

"Humility is my middle name," Harry said seriously.

Susan smiled. "I'm sure."

Lisa Crawft pouted at the two of them, and so Harry offered her his other arm. His friend smiled. She took a step forward. Then she stopped, looked back at Daphne who slowly shook her head, sighed, and took a step back.

That was weird.

"There are a lot of people here," Lisa Turpin said.

"Political parties always have a lot of people," Blaize said as he, Terry, and Neville walked up to them. "Can't politic unless there are loads of people."

"I guess..."

"Don't worry about the others too much," Harry said. "We're only going to take one round around the room. I'll introduce all of you as my friends, and then we can seclude ourselves under the pretense of 'wanting to speak with people our own age'."

"A sound plan," Daphne agreed.

Tracey just groaned. "I hate politics."

Introducing his friends to everyone was an interesting experience. He had to be careful of how he introduced everyone, and also the order introductions were made. To mitigate favoritism, Harry took a clockwise

tour around the room. With each new group that he "bumped into," he introduced his friends, starting with Susan and Neville, then Blaize and Daphne, followed by Hannah, Lisa Turpin, Terry, Tracey, and Lisa Crawft.

Susan and Neville were always introduced first; they were members of the Founding Five, so, along with himself, they were the highest ranking individuals there. Blaize and Daphne were members of a Noble House. Tracey, Terry, Hannah, and Lisa Turpin were normal witches and wizards. Of course, Lisa Crawft wasn't even magical, but no one except his friends, Sirius and Professor Lupin, and Andromeda Tonks knew this.

It was just as Harry and his friends were about to "beg off so they could catch up with what's happened over the Christmas holidays" that someone unwanted entered the room.

Lucius looked immaculate in his silver dress robes, and Narcissa complimented him with her dark green gown. Walking beside them was Draco, dressed in the finest robes galleons could buy. There was a sickening smirk plastered over the man's face.

Harry kept his shock from registering, walked up to the trio, and bowed his head politely. "Lucius, Narcissa, Draco, it has been awhile since we last met. I had not realized you were coming."

Celestina and Augustus had not sent them invitations. Harry also didn't know how they'd gotten in, unless...

Kreacher.

Harry hadn't told the house elf that he forbade these three from entering, and Narcissa was a Black, regardless of her last name. Kreacher had no reason not to let them in.

An oversight on my part. I should have foreseen this.

"Indeed," Lucius said with the quiet confidence and grace of a deadly cobra. "My family and I were in the neighborhood and decided to stop by. We wanted to give Narcissa's cousin our heartfelt joy at his newfound freedom-because we are family."

"Of course," Harry agreed. The only sign of his wariness was the twitch of his fingers. "Please, enjoy the festivities."

Lucius smiled a viper's smile. He had Harry caught within his trap, and he knew that Harry also knew that. Curse this man.

They wandered over to Sirius Black and Professor Lupin. As they did, Draco turned his head and gave Harry a smirk, as though he'd been the one to have orchestrated this entire thing.

Arrogant sod.

His friends walked up to him. Their expressions all varied, but most were centered on concern.

"Harry?" Daphne asked, placing a hand on his arm.

"Sorry," Harry said to his friends. "Do you mind if we stay for a moment longer?"

Something was about to happen, something big, something that could be potentially ruinous. Lucius would not have come by for any other reason. Harry needed to know what that something was. If he didn't know, then coming up with an appropriate countermeasure was going to be impossible.

"It's fine," Tracey said. "We'll stick around."

"Thank you."

"Ugh," Astoria glowered at the three. "This is just what we need-a bunch of arrogant sods."

"Stori," Daphne whispered, her voice containing a hint of warning. Lisa Crawft, the only one who didn't know the Malfoys, watched on with worry.

"Sirius, it's wonderful to see you in such high spirits," Lucius greeted with false joviality. He sounded genuinely happy. Harry was reluctantly impressed by the man's acting ability.

What's Sirius going to do?

Harry was understandably worried. Sirius was his godfather, but he was also a loose cannon. There was no telling what that man would say or do.

To Harry's relief, Sirius did not react rashly, but instead graced Lucius with a wide grin. "Lucy!" he said with a cheerfulness that was teeth grating. "It's so good to see you! And Narcissa, cousin, I haven't laid eyes on you since you were a scrawny brat who followed me around everywhere. Look at how you've grown."

Narcissa twitched, but gave Sirius an indulgent smile. "It is nice to see that you haven't changed much from man I once knew."

Sirius's laugh was a loud guffaw that echoed through the now silent living room. "You know nothing can change me."

"Indeed," Lucius said, and the once "happy" smile suddenly became predatory as he locked eyes on Professor Lupin.

"Professor Lupin," Lucius spoke again, but this time, his tone was different. No longer jovial, no longer kind, it was now laced with amused venom. "It has been so long since you and I have seen each other. I hear you're teaching at Hogwarts now."

Professor Lupin must have sensed the underlying poison in Lucius's tone. He was tense, like a coiled spring. "Lucius. It has indeed been a long time. You are correct. I am a teacher at Hogwarts these days."

Out of the corner of his eyes, Harry spotted Celestina, Andromeda, Madam Bones, and Augustus Longbottom all head toward the now dangerous confrontation. They surely sensed it just as Harry did. Whatever was going to happen, whatever reason Lucius was here for, the moment was coming soon.

"You teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, yes?" Lucius inquired with polite curiosity. "Draco has told me so much about you. He has given you nothing but praise."

From the disgusted expression on Malfoy's face, Lucius's words were a

lie.

"Has he? I'm very grateful, though I'm just doing my best to instruct the next generation," Professor Lupin said, his expression and voice humble.

"Truly? That is good to hear. You seem to have a lot of experience," Lucius said. His lips curled into a cruel smile. "Though I am not surprised, given the dark nature of your existence."

Oh, no.

Harry's eyes widened at the same time that Professor Lupin became ramrod straight.

"I'm not sure what you mean," Professor Lupin said, his voice choked.

Lucius's smile couldn't have been more vicious if he tried. Harry, upon seeing that smile, tried to rush through the crowd, to head off whatever Lucius was going to say. He was too late.

"Oh, do not be modest, Professor Lupin. There is no need to hide the fact that you are a werewolf."

With only a few words, Lucius Malfoy not only ruined Harry's yuletide party, but he also destroyed Professor Lupin's reputation.

Harry should have known that his good fortune wouldn't last.

XoX

Lucius Malfoy had left the party after dropping his bomb, politely excusing himself as he and his family disappeared. Harry had been unable to repair the damage done. Celestina and Augustus had taken charge, subtly convincing the others to leave-not that there had been much need. Once Lucius had told everyone that Professor Lupin was a werewolf, they were all too happy to leave.

That poisonous snake!

Harry wanted to rip his hair out in frustration. He should have known that

Lucius knew of Professor Lupin's condition, should have realized that man would attack the professor. Pettigrew had been a Death Eater. That meant every Death Eater in Voldemort's inner circle had known about Professor Lupin's affliction.

As a werewolf, Professor Lupin was one of the few weak points that Lucius could attack to undermine Harry. He couldn't attack Harry directly. That was political suicide. However, if he attacked Professor Lupin, exposed Professor Lupin for what he was, then he wouldn't need to attack Harry. Word would spread, and pretty soon, everyone would know that Harry was friends with a werewolf.

Werewolves were hated in wizarding society. Many considered them to be a blight, a black mark, a stain. Those who befriended a werewolf were shunned as if they were a werewolf themselves. The very act was considered criminal. Everyone would treat you like you had the plague. Harry's reputation was sure to suffer for this, especially since he had no intention of leaving Professor Lupin to fend for himself. Was there any way to recover from this?

It was the next day. Christmas morning. Harry had done as he'd always done-exercised, washed off and got dressed, and then sat down to breakfast.

The Daily Prophet was already on the table when he arrived in the kitchen. The front page headline was titled *DARK ARTS TEACHER IS A WEREWOLF! YOUR CHILDREN AREN'T SAFE! By the Daily Prophet's Gossip Correspondent, Rita Skeeter.*

Hogwarts has gone barmy. While we all know that Albus Brian Percival Wulfric Dumbledore is an oddball, none of us knew how dangerous such eccentricities could be. Just yesterday, we discovered that Professor Remus Lupin, the newest Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, is a werewolf! This writer is truly appalled by how the headmaster of Hogwarts was willing to hire such a dangerous creature, and the parents of the children who attend Hogwarts are even more so.

"I've known Remus Lupin since we attended Hogwarts together," said one concerned parent. "I never knew that he was a monster. Had I

known, I would have never gone to Hogwarts, and now that I do know, my child certainly won't be going back!"

"My son was always wary around Professor Lupin," a young mother who shall remain nameless for her own protection stated in an interview. "Now we know why. Dumbledore, how could you hire a monster to work for you?"

These are just some of the concerns voiced by parents everywhere. There are many more. As of early this morning, no less than 200 letters have been sent to Hogwarts, demanding the immediate removal of Professor Remus Lupin from his post as the DADA professor. At the head of this crusade to remove such a dangerous creature is none other than Lucius Malfoy, a member of the Board of Directors at Hogwarts, and a man who's always believed in keeping our young safe.

"I've known Remus Lupin since we were young and attending Hogwarts together. I had always admired his diligence, and was glad when I learned he'd be teaching my son," Lucius Malfoy admitted to the press. "However, when I learned that he was a werewolf, I became shocked. He'd always struck me as a kind child, but I suppose it was merely a mask that he used to hide his more sinister nature. I can't believe the headmaster hired someone like that, knowing it would place our children in jeopardy."

We at the Daily Prophet cannot condone letting a known monster work at Hogwarts. While we understand that finding a professor for the Defense Against the Dark Arts position is difficult, the headmaster should have chosen a better person for the job.

For more information on Professor Lupin, go to page 6.

Harry didn't think he'd ever been more furious. The entire article was pure vitriol. It was tripe.

Too bad sheep love to eat the shite that people like Lucius feed them.

Professor Lupin was currently at Hogwarts, having returned there immediately after the party to speak with the headmaster. Harry hadn't heard back from him. He hoped the man would return some time today.

After the party, Celestina had apologized for what happened. It wasn't her fault, however. No one could have predicted that Lucius would learn of the party. It hadn't been advertised, and in fact, Celestina and Augustus had done their best to send invitations out discreetly. That Lucius found out regardless meant one of the people invited had informed him.

If I ever find out who told Lucius, I'm going to make them regret being alive.

"Morning, Harry," Lisa mumbled as she entered through the doorway. A necklace hung from around her neck, jingling as she stumbled to her seat. It was made from white gold, and a small pendant sat in the center.

Harry had commissioned that necklace for her Christmas present. It was a magical item that had been enchanted with basic protection magic. While it wouldn't stand up to dark magic, it would protect her from basic jinxes and hexes, which might become necessary in the future. He'd given it to her last night.

"Good morning," Harry grunted.

Lisa frowned as she grabbed the cup that he slid over to her. "What's wrong?" she asked before taking a sip of the rejuvenation potion.

Harry pushed the newspaper toward her. "See for yourself."

As Lisa read the newspaper, Sirius walked into the kitchen. He looked worse than Harry. Bags hung under his bloodshot eyes, his posture was slouched, and his face held a haggard appearance like he'd aged 20 years in a single night. Slumping as he sat down, Sirius greeted Harry and Lisa with a grunt before piling the plate that appeared before him with food.

"You look like you got a good night's rest," Harry snarked. "Couldn't sleep?"

Sirius shook his head. "Not a wink."

"Worried about Professor Lupin?"

"Yeah..."

Harry couldn't blame Sirius for being worried. There was no telling what would happen now that Professor Lupin's secret was out. However, the fact that he'd been denounced as a werewolf was debilitating. Werewolves couldn't hold jobs, they weren't allowed in most places-including Diagon Alley-and they had no rights to speak of. Being a muggleborn was easier by far.

Professor Lupin didn't return to Grimmauld Place for another two hours, and when he finally arrived, his worn down appearance said it all. Harry didn't think he'd ever seen someone look so defeated.

"I'm no longer going to be your professor, Harry," Professor Lupin said with an accepting smile as they sat down around the living room. He and Sirius had taken a pair of chairs while Harry sat on the couch with Lisa.

"You mean Dumbledore fired you?!" Sirius all but shouted.

Professor Lupin shook his head. "No, Headmaster Dumbledore was going to fight on my behalf. However, doing so would have been a futile struggle. It would have weakened his position, so I resigned."

"Given the current situation, that was probably the best way to mitigate the damage," Harry admitted.

"What are you saying?" asked Sirius, aghast.

"I'm saying that if he'd stayed as a professor, Headmaster Dumbledore and he would have had to fight a losing battle," Harry said. "Professor Lupin is a werewolf. Regardless of everything else, that fact won't change, just as the hearts and minds of the people won't change. They would have been fighting against the entire wizarding world. That's not a fight that can be won, not even by a man like Headmaster Dumbledore."

Even though he said this, it was still galling to be forced to submit to Lucius Malfoy's scheme. Harry hated that he couldn't think of a way to rectify this situation. The only possible way for this to be even somewhat repaired was if...

If Professor Lupin had a job.

"What are you going to do now?" asked a curious Lisa.

"Now?" Professor Lupin shrugged. "I don't know. Since everyone knows I'm a werewolf, I can't find employment. I might have to get a job in the muggle world."

"Mundane world," Harry corrected.

Professor Lupin blinked. "Huh?"

"Why don't you just stay here?" Sirius suggested. "This place is pretty big, and I've got enough money to live comfortably for the rest of my life. You don't need a job if you stick around."

Shaking his head, Professor Lupin said, "Thank you, but no. I'd feel bad if I had to rely on you."

"Actually, I think it's a great idea." Harry stood up. "Stay here for now. I'll fix this."

"Fix this?" Professor Lupin looked like someone had struck him in the face. "How?"

Harry grinned. "By finding a way to show the world that you aren't dangerous."

Another chapter has come and gone, and Harry seems to be getting over his guilt a bit more. Part of the problem with writing about someone who can remember everything is that he tends to be too serious. People like Harry take every problem onto themselves. It's annoying, but what can you do.

Before I forget, I have a quick announcement. The fifth book of my American Kitsune series, *A Fox's Vacation*, is finally available for pre-order. If any of you are interested in supporting my dreams of becoming an author, be sure to order a copy. For those of you who do order my book, you have my undying gratitude. Thank you!

A Fox's Vacation

Hot springs, nude scenes, and fan service galore!

Spring break has finally come. Kevin and Lilian are traveling to California with their friends and family, where they plan to enjoy a week at the beach and attend the San Diego Comic-Con.

Of course, with this mixed bag of yōkai and humans involved, disaster waits around every corner. Between getting caught in the middle of a war involving kappa and kitsune, a mysterious assassin who's trying to kill Lilian, and the spandex-clad Sons and Daughters of Humanity, Kevin is going to have his hands full.

He really should have seen this coming. Whoever said that hindsight is fifty-fifty deserves to be punched in the face.

Patch Job

Chapter 17

Patch Job

It was still Christmas Eve. This day was meant to be spent with family, but Harry had left the moment he had finished breakfast. There were things that needed to be done, things that couldn't wait.

Harry's first stop of the day was Gringotts. The wizarding bank loomed over him like an imposing goliath, but he ignored its appearance as he marched passed the massive double doors. Since it was Christmas, there weren't many people there. Everyone was spending time with their family. Harry should have been spending time with his family, but his new directive was beyond imperative.

He walked up to a teller, waited until the goblin looked up, and said, "I need to speak with Director Ragnok."

"Do you have an appointment?" asked the goblin.

"I do not, but if you inform him that the Heir of the Potter family has a business proposal for him, he should be willing to make some time."

The goblin frowned. He frowned for so long that Harry wondered if he would ever move. After nearly a second of nothing but frowning, the goblin hopped off his stool and made for the door on the far side.

"Wait here," he said.

Harry closed his eyes and magically enhanced his ears, allowing the sounds of the bank to wash over him. Six meters away, a goblin placed jewels on a scale, the *chink chink* of shifting jewelery causing his ears to prick. To his left, a wizard paced. The tapping of his feet created a series of staccato echoes that resonated with Harry's state of mind. A door opening with a slow creak made Harry open his eyes again. The goblin

had returned.

"Director Ragnok said that he will see you," the goblin said with a sneer. "Follow me."

When Harry entered Director Ragnok's office, it was to find the goblin in charge of Gringotts going over papers. Harry walked up to the desk and sat down.

"It's not like you to demand to meet with me without scheduling an appointment first," Ragnok said. "I take it you have something important to discuss?"

"I'm going to open a restaurant that caters to magical creatures," Harry said without preamble. One did not offer a goblin platitudes unless they wished to have their head removed from their shoulders. "To that end, I would like to buy some real estate. However, due to the nature of the restaurant, it has to be somewhere more discreet than Diagon Alley."

Ragnok stopped reading through papers and looked at him. His shrewd eyes were narrowed as though he was trying to peer into Harry's soul.

"You wish to open a restaurant for magical creatures?"

"Specifically for those creatures who are labeled 'dark' like vampires and werewolves," Harry said. He reached into his robes and pulled out a parchment, which he handed to Director Ragnok. "Either I'll need to buy a building with these specifications, or I'll need to buy land where I can have a building with these specifications built."

Ragnok looked at the parchment, studying the architecture no doubt. His face remained inscrutable.

He looked back at Harry. "And what do you hope to accomplish with this?"

Harry understood enough about goblin culture to read between the lines. Director Ragnok wasn't asking what he was hoping to gain, but rather, what the goblin nation stood to gain for helping Harry with this endeavor.

"Goblins aren't allowed to loiter around places like Diagon Alley or other wizard heavy population centers. While you do have your city under Gringotts bank, not being able to go where you want is rankling. This restaurant, which is also going to second as an inn, will be open to all magical creatures, including goblins. Since this has never been done, it's bound to be a profitable venture, especially if advertised right."

Director Ragnok set the parchment on the desk and frowned at Harry. "If anyone else had come up to me with this proposal, I would have never considered it. However, since it's you, and you've proven to be a highly successful businessman, I'm going to make an exception. We'll find either a building or some real estate in a location that would best suit an inn like this."

"Thank you."

Harry stood up and made for the door. Since their meeting was done, there was no point in staying, and Director Ragnok disliked mingling any longer than necessary.

"Heir Potter," Director Ragnok said as Harry placed his hand on the door.

"Yes?"

"Next time, schedule an appointment."

Harry paused, but it was only for a second. "Yes, sir," he said before leaving.

His goal for coming to Gringotts was a success, albeit, Director Ragnok had given him a warning-which could have been akin to a death sentence in goblin terms. Since he was finished with goal one, he decided to complete the second goal for his coming to Diagon Alley.

CH Potions was still not open for business. Harry had used his connections in the potion ingredients industry to negotiate a deal for quality ingredients at a low price. He'd also contacted Neville and Blaise. Neville owned several greenhouses filled with plants, and Blaise had a more comprehensive knowledge of imports and exports than he let on. While Celestina and Augustus were technically in charge of their

business, both had agreed to help out.

Now that Harry and Cassidy had a means of acquiring ingredients, they would be able to open up the shop soon.

Harry was here for other reasons today.

He knocked on the door and waited, listening as someone squeaked on the other side. Footsteps echoed from behind the door. The sound was muffled, but it grew louder as the person on the other side got close. There was a pause. Harry heard breathing. Then the door opened and a flustered Cassidy peered outside.

"H-Harry?" Cassidy stared at him as if he was an alien entity.

"Good morning. Do you mind if I come in?" asked Harry.

"Oh! Um, erm, ye-yes! Please come in."

Cassidy's cheeks were red as he entered the shop. It was odd to see her so flustered, as she normally kept a pretty calm demeanor when she was working at Flourish and Blotts. He wondered if her new situation, being the owner of a potions shop, was making her nervous.

"How have things been? Are you nearly ready to open up shop?" Harry asked as he glanced around. This was his first time inside.

"Not yet," Cassidy admitted. "I'm still working on making enough potions to sell that I won't run out."

They walked past a shelf lined with vials that were filled with potions. Green, red, yellow, purple. The potions were represented in a myriad of colors. Harry could tell from a combination of the color and viscosity what type of potion each one was. They were all fairly standard. Rejuvenation. Pepper up. Burning salve. Etc.

"Did the ingredients come in okay?"

"Yes, they did. That's actually why I'm here today. They came in and I really needed to stow them in the back room."

Certain potion ingredients expired quickly. While most jars had their own freshening charm to make ingredients last longer, they only worked for a few months. To rectify this, the back room of the shop was placed inside of a stasis charm, which kept everything sealed from the outside world, almost as if they were frozen in time.

Harry nodded several times. "If you want, I can get someone to help you create the potions."

"Really?" Cassidy whirled around on him. Her eyes were shining like two beacons. Harry leaned backwards in a vain attempt to avoid her stare.

"That's right," Harry said. "I was thinking of having my house elf come over and help make potions with you. I figured it would be easier if you had an extra hand who could make the basic potions, which would leave you free to create the more complex ones."

"That would be nice," Cassidy said.

"I'll see what I can do about sending you some help, then." Harry eyed the magical posters on the wall. Each of them contained ingredients on a different potion. As he looked at one of the posters, it quickly changed from displaying a Pepperup Potion to a Wolfsbane Potion.

"Thank you very much," Cassidy said. "I appreciate everything you've done for me."

"You're welcome," Harry said. "Actually, I was hoping you would also be able to help me with something."

"Considering all the help you're giving me, including the shop, potions ingredients, and now this, I'll do whatever I can to help," Cassidy said.

"Then, do you know how to create a Wolfsbane Potion?"

Cassidy blinked. "I know how to make a Wolfsbane Potion, but I've only made it once or twice, so I'm not the best at it."

"That's fine," Harry said with a wave of his hand. "The reason I'm here isn't just to see if you'd do this for me, but also to help you create a

Wolfsbane Potion according to my own findings. It's stronger than the normal Wolfsbane. I've brought enough ingredients for us to make six attempts."

"I wouldn't mind practicing. Are we going to do it now?"

"I'd like to get you proficient as soon as possible. Is that okay?"

Frowning for a second, Cassidy eventually nodded. "Yes, that's fine."

"Thank you."

Cassidy turned to him as they wandered to the back of the store. The back was lined with more shelves, and a counter sat in front of the shelves. There was a door situated off to the side. Harry could not see beyond the door, but since this was a two story building, he imagined it would lead to a shop should also have a basement, so it would probably be back there as well.

"Do you have some particular need for Wolfsbane Potion, Harry?" Cassidy finally asked.

"I do," Harry said. "I'll tell you about it as we work, if you want."

"That would be nice," Cassidy said, and with those words, the two of them got to work.

XoX

Harry spent about an hour with Cassidy-until he felt she was proficient in brewing Wolfsbane potion. He also left her with his notes. It was the entire process of creating Wolfesbane potion, along with his reasoning on why he'd made certain changes to the process.

Arriving back home, Harry discovered Professor Lupin, Sirius, and Lisa playing video games in the game room. While the former DADA professor stood back and watched, Lisa and Sirius were screaming at the television.

"Come on! You're supposed to jump onto those floating boxes!"

"Ha! You haven't seen my true skills yet! Eat this-damn it! That stupid goomba killed me again!"

"You see? This is why you keep dying!"

"Stuff a sock in it!"

Sirius was playing right now, and it appeared that he and Lisa were arguing on how best to defeat a certain part of the game. They were arguing so much that they were barely paying attention to the game. Sirius had already died once more, which meant Lisa was now playing.

She was a lot better than Sirius.

"You see this? This is how you clear a level."

"N-no way! How did you become so skilled?"

"I've always been talented at video games. Now bow before your master!"

Sighing when Sirius actually did bow to Lisa, Harry walked further into the room. "Are you two having fun?"

"Harry?!" Lisa turned around to face him... and was subsequently killed when Mario leapt into a chasm. "Aw! That's not fair! I was distracted!"

"Distraction or not, we agreed to trade turns once someone dies," Sirius said, making creepy gestures for the controller. "Gimme."

"Fine." Lisa shoved the controller into his hands and stood up. As Sirius began playing again, Lisa went up to Harry. "Did you finish everything you needed?"

"Yeah, it's all done," Harry said.

"Great." Lisa grabbed his hand. "Then let's do something fun."

Harry blinked. "Fun?"

Lisa's idea of fun was, apparently, going to the park. After getting dressed

in regular mundane clothes, he and Lisa went to Saint George's Garden. It was a fenced off park surrounded by buildings. Since it was winter, the trees had no leaves, but the grass was still green. It didn't snow often in London, not unless the weather was freezing.

Freezing or not, it was still cold. Lisa had bundled up in a jacket that made her look like a snowman. Harry was wearing a plain leather jacket, which did little to protect him from the cold, but he didn't need to worry about that since he had magic.

"How are you not cold?" Lisa asked.

Mist blew from Harry's mouth as he said, "Warming charm."

"Wha-no fair! Put a warming charm on me too!"

"All right. I can try, though I'm not sure how long it'll last on you."

Harry discreetly placed a wandless warming charm on his friend, who breathed a sigh of relief as the charm activated. "I love magic."

"You've only been introduced to it a few days ago," Harry said.

"And now I love it. Magic is like the most convenient thing in the entire world."

"Well," Harry started, "I won't deny that it's convenient. It is. However, there's a lot more to magic than mere convenience."

"I know that." Lisa pouted.

They wandered through the park, passing by several benches, trees, and various decorations. Numerous graves littered the park. They were large creations, monoliths that served to show who was buried there. Some were larger than others. One even looked like a stake jutting into the sky.

"So... you know that tomorrow is the last day I get to stay here," Lisa said at last.

"I know. Christmas day. Your parents are going to pick you up early in the

morning, right? After we open presents?"

"That's right."

Harry hummed. "I'm surprised your father let you stay over at my place for so long."

"I think he was reassured about there being a parental figure around," Lisa confessed, though from the glimmer in her eyes, he knew what she thought of that.

"Yeah. Sirius isn't much of a parental figure."

"No." Lisa giggled. "He isn't."

They spent nearly an hour more outside, until the warming charm on Lisa wore off, and then they traveled back to Grimmauld Place. Sirius would still be playing video games when they arrived.

XoX

Harry woke up later than usual on Christmas day. He'd spent the previous night playing video games with Lisa, Sirius, and Remus. That normally wouldn't have been enough to put him out so thoroughly, but Sirius was a terrible influence. Harry didn't know if Sirius had not thought about the implications, or simply not remembered that his friend wasn't magical, but he'd given Lisa butterbeer.

Butterbeer was a wizarding beverage with a mild alcohol content, about 2.8%, if Harry wasn't mistaken. Underage witches and wizards were allowed to drink it because their magic flushed alcohol from their bodies. However, the effects it had on a mundane child were vastly different.

Lisa had gotten drunk after guzzling 3 pints of butterbeer. She'd then come onto him stronger than he could ever remember. To make matters worse, she'd stripped off most of her clothes, claiming she was "hot," which had probably been a side effect of being a mundane child who'd gotten drunk off a wizarding beverage. Afterward, she chased Harry all throughout the house until she passed out in the living room. Harry had then been forced to carry the half naked girl to her room, put her in some

pajamas, and then he'd gone to Sirius and lectured the man about responsibility for the next two hours. After which he'd passed out from exhaustion.

It had not been a pleasant night.

Groaning as he sat up in bed, Harry pressed a hand to his face and circulated some magic through his mind. The headache he'd been feeling slowly faded. However, no amount of magic could keep the disturbing images of last night from entering his mind.

I truly hate having perfect memory sometimes.

Yes, there were occasions when the benefits of perfect memory were not worth the drawbacks. Now he was going to be stuck with images of a half-naked Lisa for the rest of his life. If there had been any shred of brotherly feelings for her left over, any sense of familial love, last night had done an exceedingly smashing job of destroying them.

Definitely not an image I want to have.

Harry needed to take a cold shower to bring his arousal under control. He couldn't allow himself to think about Lisa like that, nor did he want to. After staying in the shower for 15 minutes longer than normal, he got dressed and wandered downstairs, where the scent of breakfast wafted from... the living room?

Are they eating on the carpet?

He rushed into the living room. Not only were Sirius and Lisa eating on the carpet, but Lisa was lying on her stomach as she shoved French toast into her mouth. Sirius was sitting cross-legged by the Christmas tree. However, he was a sloppier eater than Lisa. Harry didn't know how long they'd been eating, but there was already bits of food in his godfather's goatee.

"Why can't you two take Moony's example and at least eat on the couch?" Harry asked, gesturing to Professor Lupin, who was, indeed, sitting on the couch as he carefully ate breakfast.

"Harry!" Sirius greeted cheerfully, completely ignoring everything Harry had just said. "Happy Christmas!"

"Happy Christmas, Harry!" Lisa also greeted.

Harry pressed his palm against his face and turned to Professor Lupin, who merely smiled at him. "Happy Christmas, Harry."

He sighed. "Happy Christmas."

"Grab some breakfast and come join us, Harry," Lisa said. "We're going to open presents soon."

"I can't wait!" Sirius cheered like a child who'd just been given the keys to the car.

Harry sighed again, but he went into the kitchen, grabbed some breakfast, and wandered back into the living room. He sat down next to Lisa. She seemed awfully chipper for someone who'd gotten drunk the previous night. Of course, that was likely because Harry had used magic to clear the alcohol from her system so she wouldn't have a hangover.

"We should at least wait until Lisa's parents arrive," he said.

I still need to give her a lecture on accepting beverages from someone as morally unscrupulous as Sirius Black.

That would be for another time, however. Today was Christmas, and so it wouldn't do if he were to ruin it by giving his best friend a lecture.

While Sirius and Lisa moaned in complaint, Harry remained adamant about waiting for Lisa's parents, who arrived fifteen minutes after everyone had finished eating. Greetings had been subdued. This was mostly because of Mr. Crawft. The man remained gruff even though he was in someone else's house. Harry sighed. At least he was polite.

Once the two Crawfts had arrived, Lisa and Sirius had tore into their Christmas gifts like, well, children. It was almost like watching a couple ravenous beasts tear into a dying animal. Paper and ribbons flew everywhere as though they were guts and blood. Harry could only watch

with Remus and Lisa's parents, who seemed astonished to find an adult who acted like such a child.

"Had I realized Sirius Black acted like this, I would not have agreed to let Lisa stay over," Mr. Crawft grunted.

"Now, dear. Lisa has not seen her friend for a long time." Mrs. Crawft smiled. "Would you deny her this time with Harry?"

Mr. Crawft responded with another grunt, but he didn't say anything to dispute his wife.

Outside of his necklace, which he'd given to her before the party, Harry had bought Lisa a number of gifts that ranged in price, from name brand T-shirts to movies and books. His friend had gushed over each one. Her hugs had been like Heracles squeezing a grape between his thumb and forefinger.

For Sirius, he'd bought a brand new outfit for his motorcycle, including chaps, a helmet, and a jacket. Mr. Crawft received a brand new Rolex watch, and Mrs. Crawft had been given several erotic novels, which he knew she liked because she had a secret stash that she hid in the closet. The last person he'd bought presents for was Professor Lupin. For his former professor, Harry had bought a werewolf mug, a brand new suit, and two tickets to a Led Zeppelin concert. The stunned expression on the teacher's face had been reward enough.

Harry wasn't the only one who'd bought presents. Lisa, Sirius, and Professor Lupin had all given him incredible gifts. From Sirius, Harry was given several books on mechanics plus an expensive broom cleaning kit. Remus had bought him a rare book on Charms that Harry had been searching for but hadn't been able to find. The best gift, however, had come from Lisa.

"Oh... wow..." Harry muttered as he tore away the packaging and saw the present hidden inside.

It was a brand new computer. Harry had never owned a computer before, but he'd used enough to understand that this one was an excellent buy—one of the best that a regular citizen could get. It had a 66 MHz P5-based

Pentium processor. It came with a Windows NT 3.1 operating system, and there was also a game that had come with it as a package: *Doom*.

Gaming was a relatively new concept. Video games had technically been around since 1950. However, they were mostly novelties back then. The only people who had played them were programmers who had access to computers, and they were very simple games. Even later on, the games were large and unwieldy, using a vector display system. They simply weren't that good.

Now people could play games on their computer. Again, most of the games were simple. Pong. Frogger. *Doom* was, according to the instruction manual, being touted as a game with some of the best "graphics" around.

Technology is coming even further than I thought.

"This is amazing," he muttered.

Lisa grinned at him. "Isn't it? I spent a lot of time working to get that for you, so be sure to keep praising me-uwa!"

She was given no chance for a come back when Harry pulled her into a tight hug. "Thank you for this. I'll be sure to treasure it."

Harry felt a pair of hands grab his back. "Y-you'd better."

"She says she worked hard getting that, but it was actually me who bought it," Mr. Crawft grumbled.

"Come on, dear. Don't belittle Lisa's contribution. She's been working several hours every day since last Christmas to get this for Harry," Mrs. Crawft chided her husband, who grunted but said nothing else.

It sounded like Lisa had been working from the moment last Christmas had ended to buy him this gift. The mere thought that Lisa had done this for him caused warmth to spread through his chest. He wished he could capture this feeling in a bottle, so he could save it for whenever he was feeling down. Euphoric did nothing to describe how he felt.

"Thank you," Harry said, giving Lisa the widest, most heartfelt smile he could muster.

Lisa's cheeks turned into a bonfire of red. "Y-you're welcome."

Presents were finished unwrapping and Lisa left with her family. Harry had gotten a lot more presents than he'd ever had before. Aside from Lisa's gift, which had also been a joint gift by the entire Crawft family, Harry had received several books from Daphne on old magic rituals, a fashionable cloak that could be used in place of wizarding robes from Blaize, several different types of Honeydukes candy from Tracey, the newest star chart from Terry, a book on Egyptian magic from Lisa Turpin, sealed plant ingredients from Neville, and an advanced dueling kit from Hannah and Susan. That was on top of all the gifts he'd gotten from Sirius and Professor Lupin.

I think this year is my biggest haul yet.

"So how was it?" Sirius asked. Harry looked up from his place on the floor. Sirius was also sitting on the floor, his face split into a wide yet nervous grin. "Your first Christmas here, I mean. Did you have fun?"

"Yeah, I did," Harry admitted. "Thank you, Sirius. This has been one of the best Christmases I've ever celebrated."

Since befriending Lisa, most of his Christmas celebrations had been with her and her family. While they had been fun and exciting, it wasn't quite the same as this year. There was something different. Perhaps it was because Sirius was his godfather, or it could have just been because of the man's exuberant personality. Whatever the case, this Christmas had been a lot of fun.

"Hehe, you're welcome."

Sirius looked quite pleased with himself. His grinning face had the kind of satisfied look that Harry expected to see on a well-fed and lazy cat who was sunbathing.

Harry ended up putting most of his presents in his room. Since there were a lot of books, he transfigured a bookshelf inside of his bedroom

and placed the books there. He also took out all of the books that he'd memorized out of his trunk and put them on the shelf as well. There was no sense in lugging around a book that he'd already memorized.

It took nearly an hour to organize his presents. It was lunch time when he finished, and Harry walked into the kitchen, ignoring Walburga's portrait, which seemed to be pouting at having been forced into silence. Sirius and Remus were eating when he entered. He sat down beside them as a plate with a sandwich appeared on it.

"Sirius," Harry said as he stared at his sandwich.

"Hm?" Sirius looked up, his mouth half full.

"There's something I need to discuss with you."

Swallowing his food, Sirius said, "what's with the formal tone?"

"I'm not sure if you know this, but as members of the Founding Five, you and I have seats on the Wizengamot and the House of Lords."

The Wizengamot was the judicial body through which trials were held. Every person who was placed on trial stood before the Wizengamot as they were either sentenced for their crimes or proven innocent. Meanwhile, the House of Lords was half of the governing body. While the Ministry governed, it was the House of Lords that passed laws, though they still needed approval from the Minister of Magic.

"We do?" Sirius asked.

Harry gave his godfather a blank stare. "Did you not know that?"

"Um... no, but I never really cared for crap like that."

"Well, you're going to have to care now," Harry said adamantly. "I'm not old enough to claim my place on either the Wizengamot or the House of Lords. Currently, both House Black and House Potter's seats are empty. Someone needs to fill those places until I'm old enough to assume them myself."

While Sirius spent most of his time goofing around or working on his motorcycle, he wasn't dumb. He understood the meaning of those words. It was hard not to.

"Oh, no," Sirius said, shaking his head. "No, no, no. Look, Harry, I know you're all gung ho for this political stuff, but I'm not cut out to be a politician. I have no talent for it. Besides, I hate politics to begin with. Half the reason I ran away from my parents was so I wouldn't have to deal with politics."

Harry nodded. "I understand, which is why you won't have to do anything but sit there during meetings. I'm not expecting you to do anything. However, I need someone to take up those two positions and report what's happening to me." Sirius's stubborn expression didn't waver. Harry sighed and leaned forward. "Look, Sirius, considering what happened to Moony, we can't afford to stay in the dark. Lucius Malfoy is a huge threat, and he has a good majority of the dark houses in his pocket. I need you there, so you can gather information on him for me."

Lucius Malfoy had one of the largest block of votes on the Wizengamot and the House of Lords. More than half the dark houses were in his debt, owed him favors, or had entered an alliance with the House of Malfoy. The only dark houses that weren't aligned with him were the fringe families. However, while the fringe families actually make up more than 45% of the governing body, they were a fractured group.

The only solid voting block for the fringe families was Nathaniel Greengrass's. He, and those aligned with him, made up around 30% of the voting blocks for fringe families, making him someone who could swing votes in favor of whoever he deemed fit. He was like that single ingot on a scale. Whenever the light and dark sides were deadlocked, he was the person they had to convince to make their side's law pass.

Sirius scratched his head. "Damn, you know how to hit where it hurts, bringing up that bigot. All right, fine. I'll attend those stupid meetings for you."

"Thank you." Harry shared a quick grin with Professor Lupin.

"But who's going to watch the house while I'm gone?" Sirius asked.

"Why, Sirius, don't you remember saying I could stay here?" asked Professor Lupin, his calm smile holding a hint of mischief. "I would be more than happy to house sit for you while you go and enjoy sitting in meetings for several hours a day."

Sirius slammed his head onto the table and groaned.

"Fuck you, Moony. Fuck you."

XoX

The days passed by more quickly than Harry had expected. Harry had spent his days with Lisa, or Sirius and Moony. He hadn't been able to see his friends from Hogwarts since the party, but that didn't surprise him. They had their own things to do with their families.

It was the last day of the holidays. Tomorrow, Harry would go with Sirius to platform nine and three-quarters. Professor Lupin would not be joining them. Much as it pained Harry to admit, at the moment, it was better for the former Dark Arts professor to lie low. It would be especially bad if he showed up at the platform where a bunch of children were being seen off by their parents.

As Harry showered after his workout, he thought about what steps had been taken to mitigate the damage done by Lucius's scheme. It wasn't much. Professor Lupin had resigned, and Headmaster Dumbledore had not made any comments to the Daily Prophet, other than to let them know that Professor Lupin would no longer be teaching at Hogwarts.

Harry was impressed by the headmaster's ability to repair his damaged reputation without slandering Professor Lupin or claiming ignorance. He'd let the media make up their own minds by not commenting on his thoughts. Even so, all he'd done was seal the cracks. He hadn't actually fixed anything. Those cracks in his defense could be reopened if someone decided to attack him again.

They were fortunate that the headmaster was intelligent enough not to fall prey to Lucius's tactics more than once. So long as Headmaster Dumbledore didn't do something that the Ministry would disapprove of, Lucius would have no ammo to attack further.

After getting out of the shower, Harry donned brand name jeans, a shirt, and his new jacket. He wandered into the game room. Sirius and Professor Lupin were playing Mario again.

"I'm heading out," he told them. "I'm going to meet some people. I don't know how long I'll be gone."

Sirius was not in charge of the controller right then, and he frowned at Harry. "Where are you going?"

"I'm... going to visit Hermione's parents."

Sirius remained silent for a moment. Professor Lupin was still playing, and he was surprisingly good, having cleared a level while he and Sirius spoke. When his godfather did speak, he sounded like he was being cautious in picking his words. "Do you want me to go with you?"

Harry shook his head. "Thank you, but no. I'd like to do this myself."

Nodding, Sirius said, "okay. I'll let you do this, but be sure to come back before it gets dark. Oh! And don't just bottle everything up. I'm serious. If you feel angry or sad or whatever, then be sure to talk to me."

"Will do," Harry said.

"You should also be careful when you go out," Professor Lupin added. "There've been people disappearing around London. I know that Hermione's parents don't live near where the disappearances are happening, but you can never be too careful."

"I know," Harry said. "Don't worry. I'll be careful."

The Grangers lived in a cul-de-sac much like the Crawfts. All of the houses were uniform, one-story buildings with the same colored roofs and walls. As he moved down the walkway, he looked at the numbers on the houses. The Grangers' house was number 204.

It turned out the house was at the end of the cul-de-sac, in a small dead end. Harry stood in front of the door. His hands shook. He knew what he had to do, but now that he was here, standing before the house of his

friend's parents, all of his nerve had fled him. What would they say when they saw him? How would they feel?

When Hermione had died, Harry had felt like something had swallowed him. He'd become lost in darkness. Part of that was because he blamed himself for not being proactive. If only he'd done more, if only he'd solved the mystery behind the Chamber of Secrets. If only if only if only. He'd kept thinking about all the things he could have done, should have done, and it had consumed him.

These were Hermione's parents. Harry had been hit hard when she died, but he was just a friend. How much harder had her death hit the Grangers? How could he even face them knowing that he was the cause of their suffering?

It was while he stared at the door in indecision that a light clicking echoed from the other side. Harry's eyes widened as the door opened. The woman on the other end, easily recognizable by her brown hair and eyes, stared at him in shock.

"Harry?" she said, as though she was having trouble believing he was there.

"Mrs. Granger." Harry swallowed. His mouth felt dry. "I'm here to-"

Words fled when Harry was suddenly engulfed in an unexpected hug. Harry froze. His body felt like it had been dunked into ice cold water. He had no idea what to do, no clue as to how he should respond.

Mrs. Granger pulled back and smiled. It was a smile laced with sadness, which could be seen through her tired eyes and the weariness of her posture. "It's very good to see you, Harry. Won't you come inside for a bit?"

His reason for being here had simply been to apologize. However, faced with this woman's smile and the motherly aura coming off her, he could do nothing but agree.

"Um, yes. I'd like that."

Mrs. Granger lead him inside, and Harry looked at the many pictures lining the walls. All of them featured Hermione. There was a young Hermione holding an award of academic excellent, another smiling into a camera with her two large front teeth showing. And there were still more of Hermione at various stages of her life, including a magical one of Hermione after getting her wand.

Mrs. Granger's voice interrupted his inspection. "Come on into the kitchen. You're just in time for a spot a tea."

The wooden floor shifted into tiles. Harry glanced around. The kitchen and living room shared the same space, with a small carpeted section marking where the living room began. A man was sitting on a couch, watching the news, which was discussing another disappearance that had happened. Harry recognized Mr. Granger.

"William? Look who's come for a visit," Mrs. Granger said.

William Granger shifted and turned his head. He stared at Harry for a second, nodded, and went back to the TV. It was like he hadn't even seen Harry.

Mrs. Granger gave him a pained smile. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid William hasn't been the same since..." she trailed off. Harry forced back the lump in his throat.

"I understand. You don't need to say anymore."

"Thank you."

Tea was served on the back porch, which sat next to a small but lovely garden. Harry recognized the myriad of flowers. Looking at all the different varieties made him wonder how the one's he'd cultivated at the Dursley's were doing.

They've probably died off. Petunia doesn't know how to garden.

"I want to thank you for coming, Harry," Mrs. Granger said. She and he sat at a round, glass table. "I've wanted to speak with you for some time, but we could never get in touch. I'm afraid muggles can't use owl posts."

"Mrs. Granger, I-"

"Oh, that's right! I have something I wanted to show you." Mrs. Granger stood up. "Wait here for just one moment, please."

Harry could do nothing as Mrs. Granger went back inside, presumably to grab something that she wanted to show him. Frowning, he turned back to the garden. Had Hermione been into gardening? He didn't know. The thought made his chest sting. There had been so much about Hermione that he didn't know, and now he would never know except through second hand information.

The door opened and Mrs. Granger walked back outside. She was carrying a box underneath her arm, which she set on the table. It was a simple box shaped like a small chest. There was a lock on the front. Mrs. Granger unlocked it with a key, and then opened the chest, revealing its contents to Harry.

"These are..."

"The letters that you and everyone else sent her," Mrs. Granger said, her sad smile back in full force. "Hermione never had any friends before you and the others came along. Thanks to her intelligence, none of her peers wanted to spend time with her. She found solace in books and the praise of her teachers. It's why she always tried so hard at school."

Harry knew that much from his conversations with Hermione. She'd shared a lot about her past with him, how the other students had made fun of her for getting good grades, how she'd kept her loneliness at bay by reading books, the names the students used to call her thanks to her teeth. Still, he let Mrs. Granger talk. The woman probably knew that he knew this, but she wanted to reminisce.

"That's why I'm really grateful to you." Mrs. Granger smiled at him. Harry thought it would have been better if she'd stabbed him through the chest. "After she befriended you, you were all she ever talked about. She would go on and on about you and the others, about how much fun she was having, and how she couldn't wait to see you all again."

"Why?" Harry whispered.

Mrs. Granger frowned. "Excuse me?"

"Why are you... being so nice to me? Why don't you hate me?"

A perplexed expression overcame Mrs. Granger's features. "I'm afraid I don't understand. Why would I hate you?"

"Because," Harry choked. "Your daughter only died because I failed to protect her. I'm supposed to be the Boy-Who-Lived, the wizarding genius who can do anything when he sets his mind to it. But I couldn't protect one of my friends. I couldn't protect Hermione. I let her die. I was negligent, and my negligence is what killed her."

"Now that's ridiculous," Mrs. Granger said.

"It's not! I'm Harry Potter! I'm supposed to be strong and capable! I'm supposed to be a leader! Yet I let Hermione die! I could have saved her if I'd been more proactive! If I'd worked on solving the mystery from the start, if I'd done more, I know I could have saved her!"

Harry's breathing was a heavy rasp. His chest ached from shouting. His eyesight was blurring-which explained why he didn't see Mrs. Granger until her arms were already wrapped around his head.

He froze.

"It's just as I thought," she said.

"Wha... what...?"

"Out of all the people Hermione told me about, you're the one she talked about the most," Mrs. Granger continued. "She said that you always tried to make everyone think you were perfect, but that you took everything that went wrong as a personal failure on your part."

"That... that's not..."

"It's hard, isn't it?" her words silenced him. "Trying to be perfect all the time, trying to take all the responsibilities onto your shoulders, that has to be difficult. But you know what, Harry? You might be mature beyond your

years, but you're still only twelve. No twelve year old is perfect, not even if they are The-Boy-Who-Lived."

The fight was leaving him. Harry felt weak, tired, defeated. He hated this feeling, but he couldn't seem to gather his strength.

"You don't understand. I have to be perfect."

"Not even adults are perfect," Mrs. Granger said. "There were plenty of adults involved in what happened, but not even they were able to save my daughter. If they couldn't, what makes you think you could?"

Against such logic, Harry had nothing to say.

Mrs. Granger continued. "You've been holding onto this guilt for so long. It's okay to let it go. You shouldn't feel guilty about what happened."

Harry tried to hold it in. He really did. However, her words were like the key that unlocked the floodgates. There was no way to stop the avalanche of emotions that poured from him.

Harry's eyes burned as he cried out all of his guilt.

This is the last time you'll be seeing Hermione's death crop up as a major plot device to have Harry shed some tears. I wanted to bring this chapter of the story some closure by having Harry confront Hermione's parents. Now that this is done, I feel like it's time to say my final farewells.

To everyone who's been reading this story. Thank you. I hope you enjoy the rest of Ties that Bind. I'm expecting it to be between 8 and 12 more chapters.

Life's Little Mysteries

Chapter 18

Life's Little Mysteries

It wasn't long before Harry was back at Hogwarts, attending classes, spending time with his friends, and working on his projects in the Chamber of Secrets.

It had taken a lot of work, but the Chamber of Secrets had finally been fully converted into his workspace. No longer was it the dank, dark, and stagnant room that it had been. Vibrant lights sprayed the room with illumination thanks to the alchemy crystals floating in the air. While the floor was still made from stone, it had been transmuted to create a perfectly even surface, and all of the water that had created puddles on the floor was gathered into a pool near the back.

The pool was another of Harry's creations. He'd converted the single remaining Slytherin statue, the largest one, which he could not remove because it was magically bound in place, into a fountain. The water was recycled through a series of pipes and shot from the statue's mouth. Unlike before, when the water had been murky and unclean, now it was pure. Harry had, once again, relied on alchemy to dispose of the waste within the water.

In order to create fire, I need to find some way of separating the H₂O molecules found in the air to form hydrogen. I can use the elemental symbol for water to help with that, but that won't fully separate the hydrogen from the oxygen. Also, I'd need the oxygen to feed the flames... this is tricky.

Harry was sitting at his brand new desk. It was made from dark oak wood, polished to a shine, an expensive work desk that could second as a bookshelf. Several books were already sitting inside. Currently, all of them were on alchemy.

Several sheets of parchment sat on his desk, each one containing sketches of various transmutation circles. He was trying to create a circle that could ignite the atmosphere. It was a theoretical exercise, not something he planned on creating for real.

While making fire using alchemy sounded easy, the truth was that it was far harder than most people could have expected. First one had to separate the hydrogen and oxygen molecules found in the atmosphere. Next they had to find a way to directly manipulate oxygen molecules, lest they burn themselves when they create the fire. And finally, one needed to start the fire with a spark.

The biggest issue was manipulating the oxygen molecules and creating the spark. Separating oxygen and hydrogen was easy. Perhaps he could do something to control the wind flow and create a tunnel... but no, that would still mean he'd be right next to the detonation when the spark ignited.

This is a lot tougher than I thought.

Harry wasn't alone that day. While he usually worked on his projects by himself, his friends had taken to hanging out around his workspace. He didn't mind. There was a lot for them to do.

Neville had taken to his exercise equipment, the bench press and pull up bars, he often spent time trying to use them. Harry had shown him how they were used. However, it was still difficult. Even now, if Harry were to look at the pull up bar, he knew that he'd see the red faced Neville trying to do as many pull ups as he could.

Blaize, Terry, Lisa, and Hannah were more interested in his library of books. Many of his books were unavailable in the Hogwarts library, and even more of them were one of a kind. Since Sirius had no interest in books, Harry had gathered all of the magical books from the Black library that couldn't be read anywhere else. This included several books on dark magic. Those ones were stashed away in his luggage, however.

Tracey didn't seem interested in most of Harry's items. Since she had no interest in books or exercise, he'd built a small, constantly changing flying course. It had actually been his birthday present to her. The goal was to

fly through the hoops, which were always shifting, changing positions, and growing larger or smaller.

Harry had made these based on several algorithmic patterns designed to feel randomized. There were over 2,560 preset configurations, and those configurations could be mixed to create over six million other patterns. With 12 hoops in total, that meant Tracey had a lot of material to practice on.

Susan and Daphne were sitting on the couches that he'd set up for when he needed a break and-

"Harry, I think you've been working long enough."

-Correction. They were now standing behind him. Harry blinked as he looked at the two.

I didn't even hear them walk up to me.

"I will just as soon as I finish this transmutation circle," Harry said, gesturing to the half-finished drawing on his parchment. "I'm almost done."

"I think it would be best if you stopped now," Susan rebutted with a shake of her head. "You've been working for over an hour now. Even in this light, staring at something for so long is hard on the eyes. You should take a break. You can always come back to it."

Susan's mention of how he could "always come back to it" was her subtle way of reminding him that he had eidetic memory, which meant he literally could leave, come back, and remember everything he needed to start the project up as if nothing had happened. It was cunning of her to use that against him. Perhaps he shouldn't have revealed his perfect recall to her.

Too late now...

"I'm not going to be as much of a mother hen as Susan," Daphne said, which caused Susan to pout. "But I do think you should stop for today. It's the weekend. Don't you think it would be nice if we could go outside."

It was early spring. February 25th. The snow had melted and the trees were no longer quite so barren. While the weather remained cold, it was beginning to grow warmer.

Harry realized that everyone was now staring at him, Daphne, and Susan, their faces expectant. He sighed. "I suppose it couldn't hurt to take the rest of the day off and do something fun."

Daphne and Susan shared a fist bump. Harry wondered if they had learned that from Lisa. It was such a mundane action.

Everyone left the Chamber of Secrets via a tunnel that led them to the dungeons. The exit was hidden behind a tapestry of a serpent, and it was in the same hallway as the Slytherin dorms.

A clear sky greeted them as they emerged from the castle and onto Hogwarts grounds. It was still relatively early. Lunch wouldn't be for another two hours.

Several changes had come about at Hogwarts, not the least of which being that Professor Lupin was no longer a professor. He had been replaced by a man named Adrogus Antus. He was a middle aged man with androgynous features, brown hair, and a monotone voice.

Harry did not think this man was qualified to be a teacher. He seemed knowledgeable, as he would answer any question someone hand, but he took a hands off approach that Harry found lazy. He didn't give the informative lectures that Professor Lupin had done.

Also, and maybe it was just him, but there was something odd about the new DADA professor. Harry always felt on edge whenever he was in the man's presence.

"I heard that Headmaster Dumbledore tried to get another auror to come in and teach," Tracey said as they sat around the grass. She was between Terry and Blaize.

"I heard the same rumor," Hannah said. "I also heard that Lucius blocked him from getting the teacher he wanted."

"He did," Blaize said. "Lucius used the headmaster's hiring of Professor Lupin to put his ability to make rational decisions into question. The words he used were 'if the headmaster is willing to hire a werewolf, what other dark creatures might he hire.'"

"What a load of shite," Tracey complained. "Even if Professor Lupin is a werewolf, I'd still choose him over the boring guy we have no any day."

Harry withheld the urge to hide his anger behind closed eyes. Tracey's words of "even if he is a werewolf" bothered him, but he couldn't blame her for them either. Those who grew up in the wizarding world were taught to fear and hate werewolves from a young age. The fact that Tracey still thought Professor Lupin was a good teacher despite that meant a lot.

He still didn't like the way she'd said werewolf as if lycanthropy was a disease.

"Professor Lupin is staying at your house, right Harry?" Lisa asked.

"That's right," Harry said. "At least temporarily. He doesn't want to stay because he feels like he would be imposing. I'm hoping he'll at least stick around for a couple of months, though."

"Isn't that dangerous?" asked Terry.

"Not at all," Harry said. "I've stocked up on Wolfsbane Potion. Professor Lupin only becomes a werewolf during the full moon, and so long as he drinks the potion before midnight, I won't have to worry about him losing his mind when he transforms."

"Can the Wolfsbane Potion really keep him from losing his humanity?" asked Neville.

"I don't know if you'd call it 'losing his humanity' since he still turns into a werewolf," Harry admitted. "However, it keeps him from giving into his instincts. His mind is still human, if nothing else."

"That sounds cool," Tracey admitted.

It always amazes me to see her flip opinions so quickly.

"I suppose."

Thinking about Professor Lupin made him recall the recent news he'd received from Gringotts. They had found a building that would suit his purposes, and they were currently in the process of renovating it. The total price would come to 46,654 galleons, which was a lot, though nowhere close to the amount he had been willing to spend.

Most people would need a loan for that kind of money. Harry could toss that money around like it was spare change-not that he would flaunt his wealth. He just had no problem using it to suit his purposes.

Lunch soon came, and Harry wandered to the Great Hall with his friends. They sat at the Gryffindor table. Astoria and Luna joined them for awhile, but they were soon called away by some of their friends.

"It's good to see your sister flourishing here, isn't it?" Harry said to Daphne, whose smile was soft, and maybe even a touch sad.

"Yes, though my sister has always been a social butterfly. She just never got to show it before now."

Harry nodded. Astoria had always struck him as the outgoing sort. When they had first met, she'd been a regular chatterbox, talking about anything and everything that she could think of. Even now, he could see her with her friends, talking away as everyone else laughed.

She has a way with people.

While they were eating, Professor McGonagall wandered into the Great Hall and walked up to them. She stopped in front of Harry.

"Mr. Potter. I have a letter for you."

A letter?

Now that was odd. No one would use a teacher to deliver a letter-unless they were Headmaster Dumbledore. He couldn't think of many other

reasons for the head of house Gryffindor to even have a letter. He wondered what the headmaster wanted now.

"Thank you." He took the letter. It seemed a little bland for a letter from the headmaster, but he guessed the man was still busy dealing with the political fallout from hiring Professor Lupin.

"See to it that you open it later tonight," Professor McGonagall said before walking off.

"What do you think the letter is about?" asked Tracey.

"Who knows," Harry said, pocketing the letter. He would read it tonight. It sounded like Headmaster Dumbledore wanted to tell him something that he couldn't tell anyone else.

XoX

Later that night, Harry lay on his bed in the Gryffindor dorm. Everyone else was asleep. Seamus's loud snoring drifted into his ear like the blaring of a saxon. Neville quietly shuffled around in bed, mumbling something that Harry couldn't make out. Dean Thomas lay sprawled haphazardly across his bed.

Harry held the letter that Professor McGonagall had given to him in his hands. The letter, written in neat cursive, read: *Meet me at the Shrieking Shack tonight. Come alone.*

There was no signature. This was not Headmaster Dumbledore's handwriting. That begged the question: Whose handwriting was this?

Harry studied the handwriting more in depth. There were no telling marks that would let him figure out who'd written this. In fact, the cursive was so nondescript that he couldn't help but think someone had made it look this way on purpose. It was like they knew about Harry's ability and had ensured they had adequately masked their handwriting to make sure he wouldn't recognize it.

Because he didn't know who had sent this, there was no way to know what the purpose of the letter was. A trap? Well, obviously this entire

thing was suspicious. Saying that, he couldn't see Professor McGonagall delivering him a letter from someone she didn't know.

Could she have been placed under the imperius curse?

It sounded like a farfetched idea, almost as farfetched as Professor McGonagall handing him a letter from someone she didn't know or trust.

I guess there's only one way to find out who sent this to me.

Climbing out of bed, Harry grabbed his invisibility cloak, threw it over his head, and traveled out of the Gryffindor dorms. He was careful not to wake the fat lady, who continued snoring away as he wandered down the hall.

Getting out of Hogwarts was easy. Even if he didn't have the Marauders' Map, he knew exactly where Filch would be monitoring, and he'd used scent deadeners so Mrs. Norris couldn't track him. He made it out of the castle in record time.

The night was quiet as he made his way across the grounds; not even the crickets were chirping. He wondered what that meant. Was the person who'd made Professor McGonagall deliver that letter waiting for him already?

Harry cast another spell at his feet to deaden the sound of his footsteps. Sadly, they couldn't make it look like he wasn't walking at all. A depression formed in the ground with every step he took. While it didn't look like anyone else was around, they could have been hidden under a disillusionment charm.

The Whomping Willow loomed overhead. It hadn't noticed him, he made sure it stayed that way as he silently walked to the base of the tree and opened the secret passage. He slid down. Last time he'd done this, he wasn't quite prepared for it, but this time, he bent his legs to better distribute the impact. It might have been his imagination, but he felt like that had made a lot of noise. He hoped the person who'd sent the letter hadn't heard him.

He crept forward. The floorboards didn't creak thanks to his charm,

but it wouldn't have mattered anyway. His heart was pounding so loudly in his ears, he doubted he would have heard his own footsteps. He moved forward, checking the rooms as he passed. There was no one. Every room was empty.

Coming up on the last room, Harry frowned as he slowly peered inside. It didn't look like anyone was in there either. Could the person who'd sent that letter not have come yet?

His ears strained as he listened for any sign of movement. Yet not even his ears, enhanced by his animagus form, could hear anything. Either this person was good at standing still, they were using a charm like him, or they had yet to arrive.

I'll never get anywhere if I don't move forward.

Knowing that he couldn't stand around, Harry entered the room. It was empty. There wasn't a single soul around. He moved forward, one step at a time, turning his head this way and that. He needed to keep up his vigilance. Otherwise, he might-

Harry's body froze as light emitted from his feet. His body, it was seizing up! He couldn't move! In desperation, he rolled his eyes toward the ground. There, beneath his feet, was a giant runic array. Glowing lines connected to eccentric circles and symbols. He couldn't see everything, but this was clearly a paralysis rune of some kind.

What the-!

Harry barely had a moment to realize that the entire room was shaking. Seconds later, several hundred pounds worth of rubble fell on top of him as the ceiling caved in. The last thing he felt was an incredible weight crushing him as he was buried alive.

XoX

Sirius Black was bored. He was so bored. No, he was border than bored. He was so bored he could have probably written a book on how bored he was.

Just like Harry had asked, Sirius had taken up his duties as the Head of House Black and the guardian of Harry Potter. Of course, once you had taken up your house duties, you were duty bound to attend Ministry functions. This included trials, meetings of the House of Lords where laws were ratified, and various other functions.

It was all so boring.

Sirius didn't know what he'd been thinking when he agreed to join the noble houses. Had he truly been foolish enough to listen to his godson's words? Well, he was here, sitting in a balcony reserved for the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black, listening as some pompous windbag with too much time on his hands tried to convince those in attendance why his law-which Sirius honestly didn't know what it was about since he wasn't paying attention-should be passed.

I feel like I've lost something important in all this...

Sirius could only sigh.

He was so bored.

"You really should pay more attention to these proceedings, Sirius," a voice said from behind him.

Sirius smiled. "But then I might start bleeding out of my ears." He turned his head to greet his guest with a smile. "Celestina, you're looking lovely today. Shouldn't you be in your booth?"

Moving forward with an elegant grace that reminded Sirius of a predator, Celestina sat in the empty seat next to him. "I was in my booth, but then I saw you sitting by your lonesome and thought you could use some company."

"Well, I certainly don't mind having such beautiful company."

"Such a flatterer." Celestina looked down at the man talking on the podium. "But you really should listen to what this man has to say. You're only here because Harry asked you to take up your position as the Head of House Black, right? That means he's asking you for help. It would be a

shame if you disappointed him."

Sirius sighed. "Yeah, I guess it would."

"It definitely would. Now pay attention."

With a hefty sigh, Sirius did as he was told. He really did want to help Harry-even if that meant putting up with boring politics.

He didn't know who the person down below was, but that hardly mattered. He could tell just from listening to the crap spewing from the man's mouth-some garbage about stricter penalties for muggleborns who broke the law-that he was just a mouthpiece. A puppet. More than likely, the person whose agenda he was pushing was Lucius Malfoy's.

It's just like Lucius to push an agenda like this through someone else to keep his hands from getting dirty.

The man soon finished speaking, and the House of Lords held a vote on whether or not to pass the bill. Sirius, of course, voted against it, and he used both his and Harry's vote. He was sure his godson wouldn't mind. Several other houses did as well. Most of them were light houses like House Diggory, however, there were a few fringe and neutral houses who voted against the law as well. Celestina was one of those people.

"What a farce," she said.

"What's a farce?" Sirius asked.

"That man." She nodded at the man as he was leaving the stage. "He knew this law wasn't going to be passed. I'm not even sure if he cares. His purpose in lecturing us about the benefits of this law were designed to bore us, so that we would be less capable of focusing and more likely to pass a law out of careless haste."

"That makes sense... I think."

Celestina smiled at him but said nothing, making Sirius feel like he'd said something stupid.

Another person walked onto the podium, and this time, Sirius almost grabbed the railing that kept him from falling. Lucius stood in front of the lectern. The man appeared inscrutable, calm, and confident. His robes were immaculate, and his hair looked freshly washed. Even from where he sat, high above the podium, Sirius could see the way it shined.

He looks like a woman from up here.

Sirius wondered what the man's angle was this time.

"As you're all aware, we recently had a problem at Hogwarts when Headmaster Dumbledore decided to hire a werewolf as a teacher," Lucius began. Sirius felt a snarl crawl up his throat. "Werewolves are dangerous creatures. They kill without mercy, act only on their most base instinct, and any who survive a werewolf attack are forever changed. This is a serious problem, and one that I believe we cannot allow to stand."

Sirius wished he had his wand. Sadly, all wands had been relinquished at the doorway and were only given back when you left.

"That is why I propose that we--"

Lucius Malfoy was interrupted when several people suddenly stood from their seats, pulled out their wands, and pointed them at Lucius. Sirius had just enough time to make a face. Then the wands fired several jets of bright red light.

Pandemonium erupted around the room. A threnody of screams drowned out the sound of the podium erupting into bright red flames. Lucius dove to the floor below, barely avoiding death. Everyone else stood up and tried to rush for the doors, which had the unfortunate accident of blocking the aurors from doing their jobs. This allowed the attackers to keep attacking.

"Damn it!" Sirius swore as he stood up.

Celestina also stood up. "What should we do?" she asked as she pulled out a wand.

Sirius stared. "Why do you still have your wand?"

Rolling her eyes, Celestina said, "this is a spare. Most of the nobles who attend these functions keep an extra wand on them during the proceedings. Can we please get down to business now?"

"Right. Let's get in there and help out."

"But you don't have a wand."

"Don't worry. I've got these." Sirius flexed his arm for emphasis.

Celestina rolled her eyes again. "Men."

Sirius didn't hesitate to race down to the bottom floor. The attackers were still attempting to kill Lucius, which was actually alright with him, except he couldn't really let the man die. Morals and all that. With this in mind, Sirius knocked the first attacker nearest to him out cold with a solid straight punch to the jaw.

"Ouch!"

Sirius hissed as he rubbed his now stinging knuckles; punching people hurt a lot more than he'd expected it to.

The other attackers either hadn't noticed him or didn't care. They continued to fire at Lucius, who'd hidden himself behind the podium, which was now a flaming wreck. That was... odd. Wouldn't most people switch targets when they realized that there was someone dangerous close to them?

Sirius launched himself at the next person, tackling them and sending both him and her spilling to the ground. The person he tackled hit her head on the floor, which knocked her out cold. The woman, who he vaguely recognized as one of the nobles who'd gone to his godson's Christmas party, went limp in seconds. Sirius stood back up.

High above him, still standing in his booth, Celestina rained hellfire down on the attackers. Her wand was a blur. Jets of red energy streamed from it, hitting the attackers one by one, causing them to crumple like a stack of blown over cards. Sirius whistled as she felled the remaining six attackers in half as many seconds.

"Damn, she's been practicing," he muttered. He actually felt a little inadequate. Just a little.

After taking care of the attackers, the aurors were able to calm down the nobles and the situation was resolved. Lucius was checked out by a mediwitch. Meanwhile, Amelia Bones, who'd been informed of what happened, was speaking with Sirius and Celestina, since they were the only ones who'd responded to the threat with something that resembled common sense.

"So you don't know what might have caused these people to attack Lucius?"

"I'm afraid not."

Amelia looked like she'd aged ten years. Sirius really felt for the woman. Being the law abiding citizen that she was, Amelia had relinquished her wand, and she didn't carry a spare like Celestina, so she'd been unable to do anything during the attack. Well, she might have still tried to physically deal with these people, but she'd been busy trying to calm the panicking nobles.

It would have been different had she been there on DMLE business. However, since she had been acting in her capacity as the Head of House Bones, she'd followed the same laws as everyone else.

She probably could have carried a wand under the claim that she was, in fact, the head of the DMLE, but that didn't seem to be her style. Amelia's modus operandi was setting an example for others. She followed the law despite how she could, theoretically, get around it, so that other people would see her and follow her example.

"This isn't good," Amelia murmured.

"Why's that?" asked Sirius.

"Because all of these people are people that either myself or Augusta invited to your Yuletide celebration," Celestina said for Amelia, who nodded. "No doubt the Daily Prophet is going to mention that in the headline news that this attack will surely make."

"I'll do my best to stall the Daily Prophet from releasing any information about this attack until we've determined what happened," Amelia assured Celestina.

"That's not very reassuring," Celestina sighed. "While I trust that you'll do everything possible, the Daily Prophet doesn't obey the whims of anyone but themselves. They're not going to stop from posting a juicy story if it means losing readers."

"I guess not," Amelia agreed.

They spoke for a little longer, but there really wasn't much that either he or Celestina could give Amelia to help in her investigation. Before anyone could leave, Kingsley Shacklebolt rushed into the chamber and over to Amelia.

"Madam Bones," he said in a breathless voice. "We have a problem."

The look on Amelia's face all but screamed, "*what now?*" Sirius didn't blame her.

"What's the problem?" she asked.

"Headmaster Dumbledore is requesting your assistance. It seems Harry Potter has been gravely injured."

XoX

Harry awoke with a sharp intake of breath and a jerk of his body. His eyes opened wide, but all he saw was a mishmash of blurring colors. How did he get here? Where was here?

He blinked rapidly. His eyes came into focus. A white ceiling greeted him, the cracks and crevices familiar and reassuring. The hospital wing. He was in the Hogwarts hospital wing. But how had he ended up here?

The last thing I remember was being trapped by the runic array and the ceiling of the Shrieking Shack coming down on me.

Harry frowned. Someone had set a trap for him, and like an idiot, he'd

fallen right into it.

It never occurred to me that someone might lay a trap for me...

Perhaps it was because he was at Hogwarts, or maybe it was simply because he'd grown arrogant, but he had never imagined that anyone would try to kill him-certainly not while he was at Hogwarts.

Of course, the fact that someone did try to kill him left him with a slew of questions. The one first and foremost in his mind was: who had tried to kill him? There were a number of people who might want him dead. Lucius Malfoy, Theodore Nott Sr., any and every Death Eater that hadn't been thrown into prison. However, they weren't at Hogwarts.

Could one of them have hired someone to kill me?

Possible. Likely even. If there were killers for hire, then it stood to reason that one of the Death Eaters had hired someone to kill him. In which case, the questions he needed to ask himself were: which Death Eater had hired a killer, and who was the killer? The second question was more important than the first, at least for the moment. Once he found out one who'd tried to do him in, he could interrogate them and discover who had hired them.

"Harry?" a tired voice mumbled.

Harry blinked. Then he looked down.

Daphne was sitting in a chair, staring at him with disbelieving eyes. Her normally perfect blonde hair was a dishevelled mess, and her eyes were rimmed with red, a sign that she'd been crying. She must have fallen asleep and woken up seconds after he'd jerked awake.

"Daphne," Harry said. "I hadn't realized anyone was here with me. Does Madam Pomfrey know you're here?"

Shaking her head, Daphne said, "No one knows I'm here... at least, I don't think they do. I snuck in here last night."

"Last night... how long was I out for?"

"Two days," Daphne replied. A sudden tightening of his hand made Harry look down. Daphne's delicate fingers were squeezing his hand. They were slick with sweat. She must have been holding his hand for most of the night. "It was... really terrible. Harry, you were in such bad shape when they brought you in. What happened?"

"I was... caught in... a trap..."

It was embarrassing to admit this, so embarrassing that Harry felt like he could die. He was supposed to be intelligent. People like him shouldn't get caught in traps.

"A trap?" Daphne's brow furrowed.

Harry nodded. "You remember the letter that Professor McGonagall had given to me at lunch?"

"Yes."

"It asked me to go to the Shrieking Shack. I didn't know who'd sent it because only the headmaster should be able to have Professor McGonagall act as a courier. I wanted to know who it was from, so I went to the shack and was nearly killed with a runic array that activated underneath my feet and caused the ceiling to collapse."

Harry hadn't been able to get a good look at the runic array. There hadn't been enough time. All he'd seen was a small part of the array, but it wasn't enough to determine much beyond the fact that it wasn't an array using Futhark runes.

They had looked Egyptian.

Egyptian runes used hieroglyphs, a formal writing system that used logographic and alphabetic elements. Just before the ceiling had collapsed on him and a split second after the array had appeared, he'd seen a hieroglyph that reminded him of a person sitting in a chair.

Harry wasn't well-versed in Egyptian runes yet. However, he knew a little about them from his reading of non-magical books. According to the books he'd read, that hieroglyph represented a man, so, presumably, the

hieroglyph could have been about him. Perhaps it was strung together with other symbols, which, when combined, meant something like "*bind this man in place*", or something similar.

The problem was that Harry hadn't been able to see the other runes that had been used. Without at least seeing the other runes, he wouldn't be able to remember them. You can't remember what you never saw. This also meant that all he could do was guess.

But, considering the way my body had seized up, I believe the array may have been a paralysis one.

Still, the array had seemed pretty large for a simple paralysis array. Maybe it was a combined array?

This lack of information is so frustrating.

"Harry?" Daphne said, interrupting his train of thought. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes," Harry replied, smiling in an attempt to ease the girl's anxiety. "Everything is fine."

"Everything is not fine," another voice said.

Harry nearly squawked when a man appeared in front of him, Sirius, who was glaring at him with a stern expression.

"When did you get here?" Harry asked.

"I've been here the whole time," Sirius said.

"He was in his animagus form," Daphne added helpfully. "I could have sworn he was asleep, though."

"I was," Sirius admitted. "Your talking woke me up. Harry, I can't believe you followed the advice of a strange letter."

Harry felt his cheeks turning red. "I-it was given to me by Professor McGonagall, so I thought I could trust it. At the very least, I wanted to

know who had it delivered to me. I also wanted to know who could get my head of house to deliver something for them, since it hadn't from the headmaster."

The serious look that Sirius had adopted seemed out of place on his face. "That is a good point. The only person who should be able to order old Minnie around is Albus Dumbledore. Whoever sent that letter was definitely not Dumbledore..."

"Exactly. And if it wasn't Headmaster Dumbledore, then who was it?"

Sadly, no one had an answer to that question.

XoX

Harry was eventually released from the hospital wing after Madam Pomfrey returned from where ever she'd been. The woman had not been pleased to find Daphne there, though she'd apparently let Sirius stay the night because he was Harry's godfather. She'd let them go after giving Daphne a stern lecture on hospital rules.

During the time before he was released, Daphne and Sirius had explained what happened while he'd been unconscious. The first bit of news was about the attack on Lucius Malfoy. It had made the Daily Prophet headlines. In fact, it was, according to Sirius, all anyone would talk about. Daphne had also informed him about how Draco was spreading the word through Hogwarts, so that everyone knew about it.

There had been no mention of his near death outside of his hospitalization for unspecified reasons. It seemed the news that a group of light family nobles had attacked Lucius Malfoy was bigger news than Harry being nearly killed. Of course, Harry soon learned that no one had even realized he'd nearly died. Everyone he spoke with had wished him a well recovery as if he'd just had the flu. They'd apparently been under the impression that he was sick.

His friends, at least, had been happy to see him back in action, and Harry had told them the truth about what happened.

"You're kidding me?" Tracey said, her eyes round and wide.

Harry shook his head. "I'm not. That letter lead me straight into a trap."

"Bloody he-ouch!"

"Not right now," Daphne and Susan said at the same time, even as they retracted the hand they had used to hit Tracey upside the head with.

Tracey clicked her tongue as she rubbed her head. Meanwhile, Lisa was frowning. "But who could have sent that letter to you? And how did they convince Professor McGonagall to give it to you?"

Professor McGonagall also knew about what had happened, mostly because Harry had told Headmaster Dumbledore of the event after being released and she had been present for the conversation. She had apologized profusely. Sadly, even though she remembered giving him the letter, she couldn't remember who had given it to her or why she'd given it to him in the first place. Harry suspected that she had been imperiused and had the memory of whoever had handed it her the letter erased.

"I have my suspects," Harry told them. "Well, I have a suspect. He's the only one I can think of who would be capable of something like this right now."

"Who is it?" asked Neville.

"It's the new DADA professor, isn't it?" Blaize guessed.

Harry nodded. "Yes. He's the only one who I can see doing this. None of the other professors would have done this, and I doubt there's a single student at Hogwarts who can use the imperius curse."

Even Harry had problems with that curse. He could cast it fine on mundane people, but it took more skill than he was capable of to cast it on another magical being. A witch or wizard's innate magical resistance kept most of them from being controlled.

To imperius someone, it required the caster to overpower that person's mental defenses with legilimency. This weakened them and allowed the curse to take hold. The other way was to overpower them with pure magic, but that required someone to have more magical power than the

person they were imperiusing. Professor McGonagall, as an adult and the Head of House Gryffindor, was an incredibly powerful witch. She was not the kind of person who'd be overtaken so easily-certainly not by a student.

Harry's thoughts were like this all throughout the day. During Defense Against the Dark Arts class, he spent his time staring at Professor Antus with a deep frown.

That day he had them read about the *Lumos Duo* charm, a variation of the wand-lighting charm. This spell created a focused beam of wand light that connected the caster's wand to their target. One of the charm's uses was that the intense beam of light forced away ghouls, an ugly ogre-like creature, and it also caused hinkypunks to solidify. It also worked wonders at blinding opponents.

After they had finished reading about the spell, Professor Antus had them practice the charm in class. When class ended, he told them that they had a 12 inch-long paper due by next week. While most of the class groaned, Harry resolved to have it finished before the day ended.

Later that night, when everyone else had gone to bed, Harry, Neville, and, oddly enough, Astoria, remained awake.

"Are you not tired?" Harry asked Astoria, who sat on one of the plushy chairs in the Gryffindor common room. He was sitting near the fire while Neville sat on the couch.

"Nope," Astoria said, grinning. "I'm wide awake. Besides, I saw you glancing at the fireplace. You're going to make a floo call, right? I want to see who you call."

She's a curious one.

"Well, that's fine. It's not like you don't already know what's going on."

"So, who are you calling?" Astoria asked.

"Sirius."

"Oh! Your godfather!"

"Yep."

"That's cool. I wanted to talk to him again."

"Why is that?"

"Um, because your godfather's hot, duh."

As Neville snickered behind his back, Harry did his best to hide his green face. "I didn't need to know that," he muttered as he reached into his robes, pulled out a bag of floo powder, and threw some of the powder onto the fire. "Sirius Black."

There was a spark, followed by a roar from the flames. The fire turned green, and then, a face suddenly appeared before them.

"Harry," Sirius said, his mouth stretching in a huge yawn. He must have been sleeping. "Is something wrong? You haven't gotten yourself into trouble again, have you?"

"Of course not," Harry said as if offended. "I'm actually calling because I wanted you to get in touch with Celestina and Madam Bones."

"Hi, Sirius!" Astoria cut in before Harry could speak. Her beaming face brought a smile to Sirius's face.

"Hello. Astoria, right?"

Astoria nodded. "That's right, but you can call me Stori."

"Will do."

Wanting to head off Astoria's conversation, Harry said, "think you can get in contact with them?"

While Astoria pouted at him, Sirius asked, "What do you need to speak with them about?"

"I'd like them to look into Professor Androgus Antus's background," Harry

answered.

Sirius paused. "You suspect he's the one who dropped the Shrieking Shack on you?"

"I have no conclusive evidence, but he's the only person currently at Hogwarts who could have possibly done it," Harry answered.

While Sirius still seemed unsure, he agreed to get in contact with Madam Bones and Celestina Zabini. He then left, his face winking out of the fire, which died down into embers. Harry leaned his back against the table and sighed.

"I wanted to talk to Sirius more," Astoria grumbled.

"Quiet you," Harry said.

"That was easy," Neville joked.

"That's because that was the easy part," Harry returned.

"I guess," Neville said, grimacing. "What are you going to do now? Let the teachers know?"

Harry thought about it for a moment. Should he let the teachers know? There was no guarantee that they would believe him. On the other hand, he didn't think they could afford to just ignore a potential suspect either. So long as he presented them with some evidence, they should take him seriously.

Except I don't have any evidence...

"I think I'll tell Professor McGonagall and the headmaster," Harry said at last. "But I don't want too many people knowing this. The more people who know, the more likely it is that Professor Antus will learn about my suspicions."

"Sounds like you've got a lot of problems," Astoria summed up his life quite succinctly.

"Yeah..." Harry didn't disagree.

Since there wasn't much left to do, they decided to go to bed. Before they could travel to their respective dorm rooms, footsteps echoed to them from the stairs. They froze.

Ginny Weasley walked into the common room. Upon seeing him and the others, she froze, her eyes widening and her face paling.

"I... uh... s-sorry... I was just..."

Guilt coiled in Harry's stomach at the sight of a frightened Ginny. He didn't like her. He probably never would like her... but it wasn't her fault that Hermione was gone. They hadn't spoken much, but Harry had blamed Ginny for what happened to Hermione for a long time. Ever since school had started, Harry had given her nothing but cold looks, to the point where she flinched whenever their eyes met.

"I'm sorry," Harry apologized. Ginny blinked in surprise. "I've been treating you poorly for something that isn't your fault. I'm sorry about that."

"O-oh, no... it's all right," Ginny mumbled, looking at the ground. "I'm sorry about what happened... I-I was aware of what Tom was doing, but I couldn't control my body. I-it was like I was just a puppet..."

Harry didn't want this to turn into a crying fest, not on his side nor hers. He quickly headed off this conversation before it could become heavy. "Don't be too hard on yourself. No one else could have done any better had they been in your place."

So, it was perhaps not the most eloquent way of telling someone they did all they could, but Harry wasn't much good at comforting people-unless their name was Lisa Crawft.

"Anyway, good night."

"Oh! Um, g'night," Ginny said.

As he and Neville climbed up the stairs, Harry heard Astoria's voice drift

from down below. "Man, I wanted to talk to Sirius for a little while longer..."

"Seems like someone has a crush on your godfather," Neville said in a light, teasing voice.

Harry sighed. "Yes. Yes, it does, and I would like to ask that you never bring it up again."

Neville just smiled.

XoX

The next morning, Harry was called into Headmaster Dumbledore's office. Daphne had gone with him. Susan had looked like she wanted to come, but after standing up with him and Daphne, she'd sat back down at the breakfast table and slouched her shoulders as if depressed. He wondered if she was feeling all right.

There didn't seem to be anything wrong with her the other day.

He'd asked Daphne if something was wrong with Susan, but she had just smiled and said, "I'm sure Susan is just trying to think about what she wants out of this relationship."

Harry didn't get it. He also wasn't sure he wanted to get it. Ergo, he decided to pretend the conversation had never taken place.

Amelia Bones and Celestina Zabini were present when Harry and Daphne arrived. They stood in front the headmaster, who was sitting behind his desk, and beside Professor McGonagall. His head of house looked put off about something. Her arms were crossed, and she eyed Celestina with something that resembled stern disapproval.

I wonder how these two know each other.

"Madam Bones... Celestina," Harry greeted hesitantly, shivering when the woman's eyes gleamed at the way he had addressed her. "It's good to see you two."

"And you as well." Celestina smiled. "I see you've brought Daphne along with you. My, but you two get along so well."

While Daphne remained stoic, though a smile did cross her face, Harry frowned. There was a hidden meaning behind her comment. That was what he felt. He wouldn't get a chance to ask about it because Madam Bones cleared her throat.

"There's a lot going on at the Ministry right now, so I'll get right to the point," she said. "First, a background check was already performed on Professor Androgus Antus prior to him being allowed at Hogwarts. In fact, the background check was done by me. Not only does everything check out, but I know him and can personally vouch for his integrity."

Harry bit his lip. That completely ruined his theory about the new DADA professor being the one trying to kill him, which left him at square one. Not good.

"Second, Professor McGonagall was examined the day after you were almost buried alive." Professor McGonagall coughed into her hand, and Harry thought he saw her cheeks turn red, but it must have been his imagination. He couldn't fathom The Professor McGonagall blushing. "There were no signs of her having been imperiused by anyone. However, there was some magic lingering around her. We suspect someone used a subtle confundus charm."

This time, Professor McGonagall's cheeks definitely turned pink. However, Harry wasn't paying attention anymore.

If someone had used a confundus charm, then they could theoretically confuse someone into thinking they were delivering a letter for one person, when they were in fact delivering a letter for someone else. However, such a thing wasn't easy by any means. First, the caster had to be more powerful than the one they were casting the spell on. Second, either the caster had to be a master legilimens, or the one they were casting the spell on had to have no talent at occlumency.

"Professor McGonagall," Harry said suddenly. "How proficient are you with occlumency?"

His head of house appeared startled. However, she soon answered with, "I am decently proficient at occlumency. However, I am not a master of the art."

Which meant that even if someone wasn't as powerful as Professor McGonagall, they could still have confunded her provided they had a higher proficiency at legilimency than she did at occlumency.

There were no students who had this level of proficiency-not outside of him, at least. Harry had already discreetly cast legilimens on just about every student, and outside of Daphne, Blaize, and several other noble children, none of them knew occlumency or legilimency. That meant it had to have been an adult.

But who could it be?

It was a mystery that Harry didn't know how to solve.

He hated those kinds of mysteries.

XoX

The days passed by in general obscurity. Classes came and went, and the status quo had returned. Harry had become the "popular and helpful student" once again, though perhaps not to the same degree as before. People still asked him for help. They still came to him when troubled. However, there seemed to be a wall between him and most of his peers. It didn't feel like they were afraid of him. It was more like they'd placed him on another pedestal.

Well, it could have been his imagination, but that's how it felt.

He was doing well in all of his classes, naturally. His friends were also on top of their classes, but that wasn't surprising. He and his friends studied together every day during lunch and after class. It wasn't just because they wanted to do well. Getting their homework and studies done early meant they could have fun the rest of the time.

They'd gone into Hogsmeade a number of times; they had shopped at Honeydukes, drank butterbear at The Three Broomsticks, and wandered

around the village grounds. However, while all of his friends seemed to be having fun, a cloud hung over Harry's head.

Professor Androgus Antsu. Despite making numerous inquiries and following Professor Antus's movements via the Marauder's Map, which he had borrowed from the Weasley twins, he had yet to find anything incriminating. It wasn't that Harry didn't believe Madam Bones when she personally vouched for the new DADA professor. The problem wasn't so black and white.

Someone had tried to kill him, and that someone had to have infiltrated Hogwarts. It would have been impossible to confound Professor McGonagall otherwise. The only person who was new to Hogwarts was Professor Antus. Also, he didn't think any of the students had the power to confound such a powerful teacher. So, unless someone had infiltrated Hogwarts without anyone's knowledge, Professor Antus was the only one who could have done it.

"Harry? Harry, are you there? Hello. Earth to Harry."

Blinking several times, Harry came back to reality. He looked at his friends. They were all sitting together at the lunch table, with Daphne on his left and Susan on his right, their usual places. Astoria was sitting next to Daphne, and Luna sat on Astoria's other side. At the opposite end of the table, Blaise, Tracey, Neville, Lisa, Hanna, and Terry stared at Harry with concerned eyes.

"Are you feeling all right, Harry?" Hannah asked.

"Oh, yes. I'm fine." Harry gave the blonde girl a smile that he didn't feel. "I've just been thinking about something."

"Professor Antus," Daphne said, nodding.

Harry almost fell backwards off the chair. "Wha-how did you know?"

"Oh, please." Daphne flicked her hair back as if imitating a snobby rich girl. "It's all over your face."

Susan nodded. "You're kind of like an open book these days."

Harry felt like he'd received a punch to the gut, or like some world renowned wrestler had just body slammed him. He still kept up with his occlumency practice every night. He still worked hard at keeping his emotions in check. He shouldn't have been this easy to read.

I wonder if it's because they just know me better now... I hope that's the case.

He sighed. "It's true. I'm still not sure I trust Professor Antus, but I haven't been able to find anything incriminating either."

"Do you really think he might be the one who tried to kill you?" asked Neville.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. That's the problem."

Adopting a thoughtful look, Blaize cupped his chin. "What do we know about Professor Antus?"

"I know that he's a former hit wizard who worked under Madam Bones," Harry said. "Madam Bones told me during our meeting. I also know that the reason he quit was because he couldn't take the pressure of being a hit wizard. That's all I could find out, though. Madam Bones wouldn't tell me anything else, and I haven't been able to find out more on my own."

He would've asked someone like Andromeda for help, but she was busy enough with her own work. Sirius couldn't help him with this. Neither could Professor Lupin. In short, Harry couldn't rely on an adult for this, which left his options limited.

"My mum might be able to find out something about him," Blaize said.

Harry shook his head. "I've already checked with Celestina. She doesn't know anymore than what I already know."

"Hmm..."

"If you want, I can ask gran to make a few inquiries," Neville said. "She has different connections than Blaize's mum. Maybe one of them can help."

"That would be nice. Thanks, Nev."

Neville grinned. "Anytime."

It was moments like this that made Harry realize how lucky he was. He'd never been a good friend, always thinking about how he could use the people around him to his advantage, always trying to elevate himself above everyone else. Yet even so, his friends still supported him. He didn't think he'd ever be able to express how grateful he was to them.

"U-um... excuse me," a voice said behind him.

He turned his head to find Ginny Weasley standing behind him, her expression nervous and her legs shaking. She looked ready to collapse.

"Can I help you?" Harry asked.

"I... was wondering if I could... I mean, I'd like to sit with you... b-but you don't have to let me if you don't want me to... um... what I mean is..."

Ginny Weasley, from Harry's understanding, had no friends. It wasn't that people hadn't tried talking to her; they had. The problem was that Ginny didn't talk to anyone. Ever since year three had started, she'd been alone. He'd see her sitting alone during breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She never showed up in the Gryffindor common room. He'd once overheard a conversation about how she stayed in the girl's dorm most of the time.

Is it because of me, or is it because of what happened to her last year?

"Sure," Harry said, pointing to a seat next to Susan. "Have a seat."

"T-thank you," Ginny said with a smile as she sat down.

On the other side of their side, Luna Lovegood leaned forward and stared at Ginny. There was an odd smile on her lips. "Hello, Ginny."

"Oh, hello, Luna," Ginny said. "How's your dad doing?"

"He's doing well. The last I checked, he was researching into the Rotfang Conspiracy that the Ministry of Magic is trying to hide."

"So, same always then."

"Do you two know each other?" asked Tracey.

Ginny nodded. "Luna and I have known each other since we were little."

"Oh." Tracey looked shocked. Harry understood her feelings.

Lunch continued on until their next set of classes. While Harry pretended that nothing was wrong, his mind was still churning over the issue regarding his unknown attacker. If he went on the hypothesis that it wasn't Professor Antus, then that left no leads for him to follow. However, it wasn't like he'd find conclusive evidence that supported his hypothesis even if he continued to watch the DADA professor. Harry felt like he was going in circles.

"A vampire is a dark creature most known for its thirst for human blood. They are typically gaunt and thin, which is because they're constantly starving since all they care about is sucking the blood of humans."

Harry did not listen to Professor Antus's lecture on vampires-mostly because the professor was wrong. Having met Selene Gallio the previous year, he understood more about vampires than this man ever would. For magic's sake, the professor hadn't even mentioned the different vampire classifications!

"Mr. Potter," Professor Antus called him out. "It seems you find my lesson boring. Could it be that you already know about vampires?"

I know more than you, certainly.

"I do know a good deal about vampires, yes," Harry admitted.

"Then perhaps you'd care to share your knowledge with the class."

Harry debated whether or not that would be a good idea. It probably wouldn't be, but, well, he kind of wanted to show off. He was also upset. The Ministry was doing a piss poor job of teaching the next generation, and it was going to cause a lot of his half-finished plans to go up in smoke before they even started.

Time to start rectifying that.

Standing up, Harry walked to the front of the class, pulling out his wand as he went.

"Do you mind?" he asked Professor Antus, who raised an eyebrow, but gestured for him to continue. "Thank you."

Harry waved his wand and a chalkboard appeared on a stand, along with several sticks of chalk. It was basic conjuration. It wouldn't last long. However, he'd pumped enough magic into it so it would last until the end of class.

He took a piece of chalk and drew a human with slightly pointed ears. Then he drew another human with slightly pointed ears. Finally, he drew a creature that vaguely resembled a human, but it looked more lifeless, for lack of a better term, than the other two. He wrote a single word above each figure, and then he turned to face the class.

"The first thing you need to know is that there are three types of vampire: Purebloods, Dhampirs, and Ghouls."

Conjuring a long, thin stick, he pointed at the one that had the word "Ghoul" written over it.

"I'll start with Ghouls. Ghouls are humans that were turned into a vampire by ingesting a vampire's blood. They are essentially mindless drones. They have all the traditional weaknesses of a vampire. They dislike garlic, they can't be in the sunlight, and they're incredibly weak, being no stronger than a regular human."

He moved the stick to the second vampire.

"The next type of vampire is a Dhampir. These are vampires who are born from the union between a vampire and a human, and they are the most common type of vampire. They have the same level of intellect that a human has. Also, while sunlight won't kill them right away, they will eventually turn into dust if they stay outside for too long."

Finally, he pointed at the third one.

"The final type of vampire is a pureblood. These are the strongest and rarest of the vampires. While they do share the same weaknesses as the other two, sunlight, silver, garlic, and crosses will only weaken them. It won't kill them. That's because pureblood vampires are actually alive."

"What a load of bull," Draco Malfoy said from his place in the back, interrupting Harry just as he was getting into his groove. "You're full of shite, Pothead. Everyone knows that vampires are just undead beasts."

Harry was about to come back with a snappy reply, but sadly, Professor Antus spoke first. "I'd suggest watching your mouth, Mr. Malfoy. I do not mind if you disagree with Mr. Potter, but if I ever hear you swear in my class again, you'll automatically fail."

Draco's ears turned pink. "What was that? When-"

"Your father won't be able to do anything," Harry cut him off. "He's the reason Professor Antus is even here, so any complaints he has are useless. Now sit down and shut up. You're interrupting the class."

While many of the students laughed-with Tracey being the loudest-Draco, his entire face now red, sneered as he sat down. "You'll eventually get yours, Pothead. Just you wait."

Harry ignored Draco. That fool wasn't worth getting worked up over.

"Now, then. Where was I?" Harry made a show of pretending he was lost. "Oh, yes! Pureblood vampires are..."

And thus the class continued.

XoX

After class, Professor Antus called Harry to remain. His friends had looked at him, as if asking whether or not they should wait, but Harry told them to go on ahead. He would catch up with them later.

He stood in front of the professor, who studied him with a frown. "You are very knowledgeable about vampires."

Harry wasn't sure what to say to that. "Thank you."

"You know, if it weren't for how sure of yourself you sounded, I'd never have believed a word of what you said."

"Is that so?"

Professor Antus paused, then, staring at him as though he was trying to solve a puzzle, he asked, "how do you know so much?"

Probing for information? Was that what Professor Antus was doing? For what purpose, and what should Harry do about it?

While Harry debated the merits of lying, the DADA professor raised a hand. "I'm not asking because I'm trying to incriminate you in anything. I'm merely curious."

Startled, Harry checked his mind to see if the professor had probed him with legilimency. He found nothing. That meant there either was no mind probe happening or the professor was just that good. Considering his own not so inconsiderate skills at the mind arts, Harry believed it was the former.

"I met a vampire during my summer of second year," Harry admitted. "A pureblood. During that time, I was taught a lot about vampires."

"I see... you weren't bitten, were you?"

"Of course not."

Professor Antus remained silent. Harry felt the teacher was waiting for him to say something, to extrapolate, but he had no intention of doing so.

"I see," the professor said at last. "You can go. However, I'd like to give you some advice." Harry shuffled his feet as he focused more fully on the man. "Be careful. There's something not quite right at Hogwarts."

"Oh?" Harry frowned.

Professor Antus shook his head. "I can't tell you anymore. I don't know

what's happening myself."

Confusion set into Harry. Was the professor warning him, or trying to throw him off the trail? Harry was tempted to use legilimency, but if this professor really was a former hit wizard, then he would have occlumency training. Harry couldn't afford to get into trouble because he got caught using legilimency on someone.

"I'll take that under advisement," Harry said.

"That's all I ask."

Still confused by the entire conversation, Harry left and was not surprised to find Daphne waiting for him. She smiled as he walked up to her and held out her hand. Harry hesitated for a moment before taking it.

She's getting bolder... or maybe she's getting more desperate?

He wondered if he should let this continue. Her affection wasn't unwanted, but considering his own aspirations and unsurety when it came to what he wanted out of their relationship, he didn't know if getting her hopes up like this was appropriate. At the same time, he didn't really want to stop either.

Does that make me selfish?

"What did the professor want to talk about?" Daphne asked.

Harry snapped back to the present. "He was just asking me about my knowledge on vampires... and he wanted to warn me that something wasn't right here at Hogwarts."

"When is something ever right at Hogwarts?" Daphne joked.

That was a good point. Hogwarts had a track record for trouble—at least with him. First year: Voldemort. Second year: Chamber of Secrets. Third year: Pettigrew, his own turmoil, and someone trying to kill him. He could only imagine what the next four years would be like.

I can't bother myself with what might happen next year. I need to keep

my focus on the here and now.

The first thing he needed to do was find out who was trying to kill him. He could deal with everything else after he had solved that mystery.

XoX

Stationed at various intersections and key buildings, several aurors had been posted at Hogsmeade. Their goal was allegedly to investigate the Shrieking Shack's collapse. However, Harry had been told in private that they were there to protect him. It made him feel pampered.

Harry hated being pampered.

The red cloak of an auror standing by the Three Broomsticks swooshed as he and his friends walked past, entering the tavern, which had already grown quite crowded. They found a place to sit that would fit all of them. Fortunately, Astoria, Luna, and Ginny were not allowed at Hogsmeade. There wouldn't have been any room for them.

They ordered butterbeers from Madam Rosmerta. Then they chatted while waiting for their drinks.

"I don't know if I told you this, but my mum bought me a muggle magazine the other day," Hannah said to Tracey, Lisa, Hannah, Susan, and Daphne. "It shows the latest in muggle fashion."

Harry twitched at the mention of the word muggle. He felt like sulking. That word should have gone extinct last year, so why were people still using it?

"I don't think you showed it to us yet," Lisa said.

"That's because I didn't bring it with me," Hannah said. "I meant to, but I forgot it while I was packing."

"So, what kind of dresses did it have?" asked Tracey.

"It didn't have a lot of dresses. It mostly focused on cute pants and T-shirts, but it did have this really cute sundress that I want to get. It's a

light yellow and it stops around your knees. I thought it was adorable."

Mundane fashion had been catching on with the younger generation of witches for several years now. The biggest reason was because the amount of magical children born from mundane parents outweighed the amount of pureblood children.

For centuries now, the purebloods had been slowly dying out. Since they refused to diversify their genes, it was becoming harder to reproduce. Even most light families, steadfast in their support of "muggleborn" rights, refused to let a magical child born from mundane parents into their household.

"Are you sure that's what he said?" Neville asked Blaize, who was telling a story about something that Draco Malfoy had done.

"Of course I am. That's what Draco always says. You know how he is: 'my father this' and 'my father that' and 'when my father hears about this' is practically all he can say."

"That is true," Neville muttered.

"Who's he complaining about this time?" Terry asked before taking a sip of his butterbeer.

"He was mostly complaining about Harry," Blaize admitted.

"That's a big surprise," Harry said with a straight face. "I couldn't possibly imagine why he'd complain about me. I wonder if I've done something to offend him?"

As several of his friends snickered, Blaize adopted a mock-serious face and said, "who knows."

Their conversation, along with the conversations of everyone else, was interrupted when a loud shriek went up. One shriek turned into two. Two became three. Soon, a threnody of people were screaming and shouting as they leapt from their seats, shoving and pushing and trampling in their efforts to run away from something.

"What's going on?" Tracey asked in a shout. Meanwhile, Daphne had taken out her wand. From the magic surrounding her, she was preparing a defensive spell.

"Look at the floor!" Susan shouted as she also pulled out her wand.

Harry had already seen what Susan pointed out. Snakes. Dozens of snakes had appeared and were biting the patrons. Harry recognized the type they were. Cobras. Snakes filled with enough venom to fell a fully grown adult.

Several patrons who'd been bitten were already on the floor, froth foaming from their mouths as more and more snakes latched onto their flesh. Their screams turned into gurgles. Their muscles twitched and spasmed as the venom flowed through their bloodstream.

"Onto the table!" Harry shouted to everyone.

He was just in time. Several snakes were under their table, and they leapt at the group with fangs exposed. One of them nearly bit Tracey. She was fortunate that it latched onto her robe instead of her. Harry sent an incendio at it. That should-

What the-?

When his spell hit Tracey's robe instead of the snake, Harry realized what this really was. An illusion. It was all an illusion. The snake wasn't real.

Then that means...!

Waving his wand, Harry sent out a massive wave of bright blue energy. The wave washed over the room, the patrons, and, most importantly, the snakes. As it moved along the ground like rushing water lapping at the shores of a beach, the snakes dissolved into nothing. Sadly, the people who'd been bitten had not stopped convulsing.

The poison might not be real, but they're bodies think it's real.

Cobra venom is an example of a molecule that prohibits the interaction of acetylcholine molecules-transmitted from nerve endings surrounding the

diaphragm muscle-with the receptor sites on the diaphragm muscle. It binds to the receptor sites, blocking them from interacting with acetylcholine molecules. Even worse, the venom molecule will not immediately break down and vacate the receptor site, effectively removing the site from active duty.

Even if that wasn't what was really happening because all this was an illusion, the mind and body were inextricably linked. When the mind believed something to be true, the body responded by making it so. It was a more literal example of how people's reality was determined by what they perceived to be real.

If something isn't done soon, these people will die.

The basic effect of cobra venom was that it caused the muscles in people to cease functioning, essentially asphyxiating them. In order to save these people, Harry needed to restart the receptor sites in their diaphragm. That meant giving them a mild electric shock.

"Tracey!" Harry barked. "I want you and Hannah to get the aurors and have them come in here. Tell them to also inform someone at Hogwarts about what's happened. Neville and Blaize, look around and see if there's anyone not in this room who was also bitten. The rest of us will administer first aid by using the shock spell to restart their muscles."

No one argued with him. Tracey and Hannah raced out of the door. Meanwhile, Neville and Blaize ran over to the counter. As for Harry, he, Daphne, Susan, Lisa, and Terry began administering the shock spell to everyone convulsing on the floor.

Known as *Fulmens*, the shock spell basically sent a small electric current through a person's body. It was supposedly used at Saint Mungos to cure magical illnesses. Harry didn't know about that. However, it worked wonders as a method of restarting one's heart. It could also be used to restart the muscles.

He and the others worked on each victim one by one. They cast *fulmens* on every person, sometimes being required to cast it two or even three, to kick start that person's respiratory system. It was hard. The venom didn't just cause the muscles to suddenly stop. It basically caused them

to cease functioning. An electric pulse could restart that process, but it took skill manipulating the electronic charge like that.

It was good that his friends had practiced magic with him, as they actually did have enough skill to use *fulmens* in this capacity. Already, Daphne, Susan, and Lisa had properly healed five people each, making for a total of 15. Harry had healed ten people. Thanks to their efficient work, Harry and his friends managed to heal everyone there.

"There were a few others who'd been bitten that weren't in this room," Neville reported after he and Blaize returned. "It seems this illusion happened everywhere in the Three Broomsticks, not just in here."

"That means we're dealing with a large-scale spell that affects a wide area," Harry murmured.

"I take it that's bad," Blaize said.

"It's very bad." Harry bit his thumb. "Wide-scale spells are hard to cast because of the power requirements. The larger the spell, the larger the area it affects, and the more power it requires to cast. While I can't estimate how strong someone must be to cast a spell like that on the three broomsticks, it's definitely more powerful than most witches and wizards."

"That's definitely bad," Susan said.

Daphne nodded. "If it really does take that much power, it probably wasn't done by a student."

"Which means it could have been done by anyone," Lisa added.

"Exactly," Harry said with a sigh.

Just then, Tracey and Hannah burst into the Three Broomsticks. Their wide eyes were frantic as they rushed up to them.

"Bad news, Harry. That snake spell happened all across Hogsmeade!"

Harry nearly groaned. It looked like the bad news just got ten times

worse.

XoX

The day had ended in tragedy.

After learning that the illusion spell had been cast across the entire city, Harry had directed his friends outside to help everyone else. The aurors were useless. They'd been unprepared, and many had been bitten. Only five of the fifteen aurors guarding Hogsmeade had avoided that fate. Harry suspected they were either attacked first, or they'd been injured defending others.

Harry had done his best to help. He and his friends had tried. It had mostly been for naught. With only six of them present, they'd not been able to save everyone. Almost two dozen people had died, killed by an illusory venom.

Perhaps if they had been mundane people, they could have been saved. However, magicals, thanks to their magic, were weak against illusions like this. Once an illusion took hold, it became a part of their magic. It entered their magic. Not even dispelling the original illusion could change that. Since mundanes didn't have magic, they weren't affected in the same way.

Headmaster Dumbledore along with Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape had arrived nearly an hour after the event had already taken place. They had come with a group of aurors. It was too late by then, sadly. At that point, whoever could have been saved was already saved and those who couldn't, well, they were no longer of this world.

Harry did not know how many people had died, as he'd only seen a few of the corpses. He imagined some of them were students.

He and his friend had been asked several questions. It was a vain effort made after the fact to figure out what happened. Harry had described the events in great detail, even offering a theory on how the magic might have been conjured—too bad all he had were theories. That magic had been several magnitudes larger than he had ever thought possible.

Even two days after the event had happened, Harry Potter was still thinking about it, trying to theoretically recreate the magic spell. It wasn't a conjuration spell like *serpensortia*. It had been an illusion, a spell that affected the mind. Sadly, illusions weren't taught at Hogwarts. It was an advanced art that one had to learn from a master.

It was dinner. Everyone was sitting at their chosen tables. However, conversation was not loud. It was hush, tense, frightened. There was an undercurrent of fear traveling through everyone.

Harry had learned the other day that six Hogwarts students had died. Two third years, a seventh year, a fifth year, and one sixth year. He hadn't really known any of them. Saying that, thanks to his memory, he at least would never forget their names. It wasn't enough.

I feel like I should have done more.

These students were the people he was going to lead in the future. Regardless of whether they were his now, they would eventually become his people, the people who helped him shape the wizarding world. A leader was supposed to protect his people. He hadn't done that.

"I'm not sure what to say about all this," Tracey said to Lisa. "I mean, I feel like crap that I couldn't do anything, but I can't even say I'm shocked by what happened."

"I know what you mean," Lisa agreed. "So much has happened to us since we started Hogwarts that this feels almost... natural."

He hated how situations like this had become par for the course.

As the meal was winding down to a close, Headmaster Dumbledore stood from his seat and took center stage. He coughed into his hand, which, when enhanced with *sonorus*, echoed across the vast hall. Voices lowered and eyes turned to him.

The headmaster's expression was not jovial. There was not twinkle in his eye, no smile on his face. Somber. Downcast. Disheartened. To Harry, he looked like a man who was being weighed down by the weight of the entire world.

"Students of Hogwarts," he said, his voice every bit as depressed as his expression. "We have faced many hardships recently. Last year, we lost a person who was dear to many, and this year, six students who should be sitting here with you, laughing with you, enjoying life with you, are no more."

Harry looked around. The eyes of many were downcast. Some of his peers had haunted eyes. He recognized them. His perfect memory ensured that he could never forget. Those people who looked like they'd journeyed through hell, they were the ones who'd been at Hogsmeade during the illusory attack.

"During this time of hardship, it is important not to lose yourselves to despair, it is important not to isolate yourself from others. Rely on the people around you, your friends, your family, the people you love. Love is the greatest magic of all. Those who have it are capable of great things. You must all remember to let yourself rely on your loved ones, and remember to let them rely on you."

The headmaster paused. His shoulders seemed to sink. Harry was reminded of a mythological story he'd once read, a Greek story about Atlas, the Titan who Zeus had forced to hold up the world on his shoulders.

"I wish I could say that all of you can rely on me." Headmaster Dumbledore's smile had never looked so sad. He'd never looked so old. "Sadly, the Board of Directors has decided that I no longer have a place here. They are relieving me of my duties as Headmaster."

The reaction was almost immediate. No one spoke. However, the air suddenly became thick, cloying, stifling. Harry could have sworn the fear that permeated the room like month old sweaty socks suddenly increased a thousandfold.

"They feel that I am no longer capable of protecting you," the headmaster said. "I am entrusting the reigns of this school to Minerva McGonagall, who shall be the temporary headmistress until someone can come to take her place. Listen to her. She is wise and strong. She will shelter you through the coming hardships. Tomorrow, I will be gone. However, do not

be afraid. Even if I am gone from Hogwarts halls, so long as there are people who remain loyal, I shall never truly leave."

Despite making that last part sound like he was telling them that he would always be there, Harry knew that it was a false platitude. Headmaster Dumbledore was no longer the headmaster of Hogwarts. That news made the world seem like a darker place.

Harry was already worried about what tomorrow would bring.

I'm sure you've all noticed, but this story is pretty far from the cannon storyline. Book 3 is definitely the furthest from cannon so far. I hope you've all been having fun reading it, but if you haven't, then I hope you can find a story that you do enjoy reading.

I'd like to thank everyone who's supported my writing. All of you are awesome. ^ _ ^

Deadly Dalliances

Chapter 19

Deadly Dalliances

In the week following Headmaster Dumbledore's forced resignation, the school had lost the sense of security that had once encompassed it. Perhaps it was merely his imagination. However, to Harry, it felt like the warm and comforting presence that Hogwarts once boasted had evaporated with the headmaster's departure.

A lot had changed in the following days, and it wasn't in a good way. Students no longer loitered in the courtyards or hallways. They hurried from class to class, barely talking, barely looking at anyone else. It was like everyone had become afraid of their own shadows.

As a silver lining, the All-House Common Room had become exceedingly popular. A lot of people spent time there after class, during breaks, or whenever they had some free time. It seemed everyone had come to the conclusion that there was safety in numbers, and it couldn't be more safe than when all four houses congregated in a single place.

On the other hand, because it was so popular, the common room for all houses was often crowded. With so many people gathered there, Harry felt uncomfortable because he couldn't talk about anything serious with his friends.

Which was why they were using the Chamber of Secrets as their new de facto meeting place.

"What do you think of the new headmistress?" asked Blaize. He was sitting on a couch, in front of the coffee table, playing chess against Terry. The look of concentration that he wore, eyes staring at the board without blinking, made him look several years older than his thirteen years of life suggested.

"What do I think?" Terry parroted as he moved a pawn. "I think she's a right hag is what I think."

"Agreed. I don't like her much either." Blaize moved one of his rooks.

Their new headmistress had arrived just yesterday, and Harry already didn't like her. He couldn't place a finger on it, not really, but something about her, a vile aura that seemed to emit from her disgusting pink cardigan, repulsed him. Blaize and Terry seemed to share his opinion.

The day she had arrived at Hogwarts was one that he wished he could erase from his memory:

It was late in the evening. The Great Hall was crowded with students eating dinner. Harry and his friends sat together, along with Astoria, Luna, and Ginny, who seemed to be doing better these days. If nothing else, the redhead smiled a lot more, though she also had a horrible habit of staring blankly at nothing. He'd once caught her gazing at a wall for nearly fifteen minutes. She might have been there longer if he hadn't snapped her out of it.

Conversations were no longer loud but quiet and sparse. Harry believed it was because of the fear permeating the school. Everyone was afraid of what might happen now that Dumbledore was gone.

"Hey, who is that?" asked Astoria as she pointed to someone at the teacher's table.

Harry looked over to see all of the teachers eating with them. That was a rare occurrence. Most teachers took their meals in their rooms after the first day, except for the Heads of Houses, who always ate with the students, and Hagrid, who just loved being around people.

Sitting among the faculty was another person who Harry didn't recognize: a woman with a pudgy face that reminded him of a toad. She wore a disgustingly bright pink cardigan, and she sat with the straight postured bearing of a snooty wannabe noble woman. Combine that with her smile, which reminded him of a combination between a grotesque amphibian and a less playful Cheshire Cat, and he already felt wary of her.

Susan looked at the woman Astoria was pointing to and said, "That's Madam Umbridge. I don't know much about her, but Auntie doesn't like her very much. She likes to complain about her a lot."

"She's the Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic," Daphne added.

"The Undersecretary, huh?" Harry mumbled.

Near the end of dinner, the one that Susan had called Madam Umbridge stood up and waddled to the front. She coughed several times. The sound bounced around the room. It must have been amplified by a sonorus charm.

"Good evening, students," she said in a sickeningly sweet voice. On the other side of the table, Tracey made several gagging noises. Terry snickered beside her. "Before you head off to bed, I would like to introduce myself. I am Madam Umbridge, and I'll be the new Headmistress of Hogwarts. I do so hope that we can all get along."

Her words caused a stir. Harry glanced at Professor McGonagall, whose deep seated frown made him wonder if she disagreed with having this woman as headmistress.

"I wonder why they sent the Undersecretary to become the headmistress," Neville pondered out loud.

"It's probably because the Ministry is in trouble right now," Harry answered. "The Daily Prophet isn't on the Ministry's side. They've been bashed every bit as much as Remus Lupin and Headmaster Dumbledore. The recent article even detailed the Ministry's incompetence in regards to how they let the headmaster run wild at Hogwarts."

Neville's face scrunched up. "So what? The Ministry is trying to save face by sending this woman?"

"More or less." Harry shrugged.

Even though he said that, Harry believed there was another reason why Umbridge had been sent here, though he had no way of confirming this.

Either way, it looked like Hogwarts was in for a rough time.

"What do you think about Headmistress Umbridge?" Susan asked Harry.

Shrugging as he flipped a page in his notebook, Harry said, "I'm not sure how I feel about her as the headmistress, since it hasn't even been a day since she arrived, but there's something about her personality that rubs me the wrong way."

When she had introduced herself as the new headmistress, she had spoken in a saccharine sweet tone that had made him want to gag. There was simply no way that tone was the regular tone she spoke with. She must have been hiding something, a sinister secret or agenda, and she was using that tone to try and throw them off guard.

"I've heard about her," Neville said. He was watching the game between Blaize and Terry as he sat on a comfy armchair. "Gran told me that she's a selfish bint who tries to ingratiate herself to Minister Fudge. According to my gran, she's a toadie who likes to lord her power and position over others... what? Why are you all looking at me like that?"

"No reason," Blaize said, still looking at Neville like he'd sprouted two extra heads. "I was just surprised to hear you call someone a selfish bint. That's all."

Neville's face burst into a bright red pigment as he looked down. "T-that's just what my gran called her..."

"I agree with your gran," Tracey said, walking up to them. She'd been practicing her spell casting at several stationary dummies that Harry had set up along the wall furthest from what he'd taken to calling "the lobby". "I don't know anything about that woman, but I can tell that she's bad news."

Harry didn't know much about Madam Umbridge beyond what he'd been told so far. He'd sent a missive to Andromeda, asking her if she knew about the new headmistress, but he had yet to receive a reply. She was probably busy with work.

While he would've loved to stay in the Chamber of Secrets with his

friends, they were required to attend their last classes of the day. After classes, they went to dinner with everyone else.

The Ravenclaw table was where they had chosen to sit that day. Their group was surrounded by several ravenclaw students who were speaking in hushed tones, occasionally stopping to glance at them before going back to speaking. With his enhanced hearing, Harry could make out bits of their conversation.

"Have you noticed how Potter and his friends seem to disappear every so often?"

"I have. It's like they just vanish into thin air sometimes."

"David thinks Potter might have been responsible for that attack at Hogsmeade."

"What? No way!"

"Well, I don't know if I believe him... still, Potter is a parselmouth. It would make sense."

Harry stopped listening. He didn't want to hear anymore.

"Oi! Do you jerks have something you'd like to share with us?" Tracey stood up, slammed her hands on the table, and glared the group of claws. When they suddenly grew silent, she scoffed at them. "That's what I thought. If you don't have the guts to say crap like that to someone's face, then you shouldn't be talking! Jerks!"

Tracey sat back down with a huff. Hannah, who sat on the girls left, whistled. "Wow. You really went off on them. Angry much?"

"Don't say that like you didn't want to do the same thing. I don't like idiots who say crap without knowing the facts."

"Kinda like how you talk about Quidditch without knowing the facts?" asked Terry.

"Can it, Boot!"

"Do you think most of the students feel the same way?" asked Susan.

"Doubtful," Daphne said as she calmly ate her food. She seemed to have disregarded the meat and was going straight for the potatoes. "There are over one-hundred students at this school. It's impossible that all of them feel the same way, and I'm sure some of them remember what happened last year." A frown creased her lips. "Saying that, I'm sure there are just as many people who believe that Harry was responsible for that attack as there are people who don't. Idiots will believe anything, after all."

"That was quite the speech, Daph," Tracey teased.

"Coming from the girl whose speech consists of shouting, that doesn't mean much," Daphne said with a teasing smile.

"Ouch. Harsh much?"

"Did this happen last year?" asked Astoria. When everyone looked at her, she elaborated with, "I mean people blaming Harry for what happened?"

Daphne and Susan looked at each other. Harry studied the youngest in their group. She was a lot sharper than she let on.

"Not really," Susan said at last. "I mean, there were a few idiots who might have thought he was responsible when they found out he could speak to snakes, but most people were smart enough to know he couldn't have been the culprit of those attacks."

Unsaid was the *"especially after what happened to Hermione"* that everyone was no doubt thinking. Harry was glad no one actually said it. While Hermione's death had already been addressed, he didn't want to re-open old wounds.

"I suppose some people are just dumb," Astoria uttered.

"You said it," Tracey said with a nod.

As dinner wound to a close, Harry caught movement out of the corner of his left eye. Turning his head, he saw a flash of pink, a ton of frills, and a toad-like face. It was the new headmistress. Madam Umbridge. She had

stood from her seat and made her way to the podium, which was set in front of the teacher's table.

"Ahem," she coughed, and the sound traveled to every part of the Great Hall. "Excuse me, everyone. I would like to have your attention please."

On the other side of the table, Tracey cringed at the headmistress's voice. Harry understood how she felt. Headmistress Umbridge spoke in a voice that was so sickly sweet it was enough to make someone choke.

"While I was able to introduce myself to all of you the previous day, I didn't have much of a chance to speak about the changes that Hogwarts will be undergoing." She paused, and a smile that was so saccharine Harry thought he would die from seeing it appeared on her face. "As you all know, the safety of this school has been jeopardized. Several students have been tragically killed, and there will be even more deaths if something isn't done. To that end, I will be instituting a number of new rules."

Harry felt a chill run down his spine. He had no reason to think her rules would be unreasonable, but hearing about how she would be "instituting new rules" made his skin crawl for some reason. He blamed George Orwell.

"The first rule is that students are not going to be allowed outside of their dormitories after six in the evening unless they have class. The second rule is that students must always walk in groups of at least two."

Those rules actually seemed fairly logical. Setting a curfew would help curtail students being out late, thereby cutting off one of the most likely times when a student could be attacked. The second rule was also a good precaution. In the event of an attack happening, one student would be able to get away and inform a teacher if the other student was in trouble, though it would be even better if there were more than two students. Four would be ideal, but three could also work.

"My third and most important rule," Umbridge continued, "is that students of different houses may no longer mix."

What?

Harry looked around at the other students. Many of them were looking at their friends, who they'd made outside of their house. Harry could see them, the variation of different colored robes mixing together to create a quad-colored sea. Only the stubborn Slytherins, the truly stubborn ones who had refused to mix, remained segregated from everyone else.

"It has become clear to me that the biggest reason people are becoming so susceptible to these attacks is because students from different houses are mixing together. For the safety of you students, people from different houses will no longer be allowed to socialize outside of classes."

While everyone else seemed confused, Harry had noticed something particular about her words: She hadn't included breakfast, lunch, and dinner in the "places where students from other houses could socialize". This meant that her last rule wasn't done for the safety of the students. It was because of some other agenda.

But who's agenda is it? The Minister for Magic, or her own?

"Susan," Harry leaned into her ear and whispered. Susan's ear went red, which he figured meant she'd heard him. "Could you do me a favor?" She nodded. "Send a letter to Madam Bones and tell her about how Madam Umbridge is trying to segregate the Hogwarts houses. Ask her if she knows anything that could help us. I'd like to know who's agenda this woman is pushing."

"I can do that," Susan said quietly.

Harry nodded and smiled.

Dinner soon ended and everyone went to their common rooms. Harry lay awake in bed, wondering how long it would take for him to get the information on Madam Umbridge.

He really didn't like waiting.

XoX

The next day was arduous.

Harry and his friends had gathered for breakfast as usual. Everything was normal. They had spoken about their next classes, argued about Quidditch, or gossiped about wizarding fashion.

"The Fowl Mouth Falcons are doing well this year," Tracey said. "I think they might be the team who wins the cup."

Harry listened as Tracey spoke of which Quidditch team she thought was going to take home the gold. He had no real interest in the sport himself. At best, it was a tool that he could use to engender himself to others, a conversational topic to open deeper dialogue, but the sport itself wasn't that interesting. Then again, the only sport he'd ever enjoyed was martial arts.

"They might be doing well, but I heard their teamwork has been suffering because Randolph Keitch and Basil Horton are arguing again," Terry retorted before munching down on an English muffin.

Randolph and Basil were both members of the Fowl Mouth Falcons. Basil was a beater while Randolph was the seeker. During their last game, Randolph had been hit by a bludger that Basil had been keeping off of him. He had naturally blamed the beater on not being able to protect him, which had caused a fight to break out between the two in the middle of a game. According to the Daily Prophet, they were no longer on speaking terms.

"Look at this," Hannah said as Lisa, Daphne, Astoria, Ginny, and Susan crowded around her. A brand new magazine for Teen Witch Weekly lay on the table, open to a page showcasing the latest in female wizarding fashion. "See the new cut on these robes? Aren't they cute?"

Susan was blushing as she looked at the magazine. Hers and Ginny's faces were nearly as red as their hair. Harry wondered what they were looking at. He couldn't see from where he sat.

"Isn't that cut kind of... immodest?" Susan asked.

"I don't think so," Daphne argued. "It reminds me of some of the dresses I've worn... except it covers more."

Harry had attended several political functions with Daphne, so he knew that she was talking about the dresses her father forced her into. They were made for the purpose of showcasing "the goods" to the parents of potential suitors. Thanks to Celestina's blackmail, Daphne had not been forced to wear anything like that for a while. Harry was grateful to Blaize's mum. He didn't like it when Daphne was forced into clothing that was so skimpy. There was also the matter of her being way too young for that kind of clothing.

I wonder if Celestina realizes how much I owe her... Harry thought about that for a moment before shaking his head. *Probably not. If she did, she'd have cashed in the favor by now.*

"Ahem."

Before their conversation could continue, a sickly sweet and obnoxious cough came from behind them. Harry, Blaize, Neville, Tracey, and Terry turned in their seat. Umbridge was standing behind them, a smile as nauseatingly sweet as her disgustingly fake cutesy cough plastered on her toad-like face.

"Excuse me," the new headmistress began, "however, might I ask what you children are doing?"

"Uh... eating?" Tracey said in a "*what are you smoking?*" kind of voice.

"Tsk. Tsk. That is not what I meant." The smile widened. "I meant what are you doing sitting together? I believe I mentioned this before, but students of different houses are no longer allowed to mix like this."

So she really is going to try this...

Harry had not been sure if she'd attempt to reinforce her "rule," but even so, he'd been up all night thinking of ways to counter this woman in case she did. In the end, he had come up with a rather simple solution.

"Excuse me, Headmistress," Harry said, standing up and bowing his head in what seemed like a polite gesture. "Forgive me for sounding so ignorant, but would you mind telling me how keeping students from different houses from interacting guarantees their safety? I'm afraid that

I'm a bit too young to understand the concept."

From the toad-like suspicion on Umbridge's face, she didn't seem capable of telling whether he was being honest or not. However, Harry, ever the consummate actor, kept up his demeanor as the young and naive student. Eventually, the woman smiled.

It wasn't a pleasant smile by any means. Harry forced back his shudder.

"I would be more than happy to educate you, Mr. Potter," Umbridge said.

"Thank you. I appreciate that." Harry smiled. "You see, since we're not allowed to spend time together anymore, I have to write letters to Madam Amelia Bones, Celestina Zabini, and Nathaniel Greengrass, and explain to them that I can no longer spend time with their children. I want to make sure they understand why I've cut ties with their families, so your explanation will help me a lot."

Harry had come to realize that he had something of a sadistic streak. He enjoyed watching Neville huff, puff, and wheeze during their first few months of exercise. He liked seeing the faces people made when he teased them. He even enjoyed it when he made girls blush.

However, he didn't think he could have ever derived so much pleasure from watching someone's face shift colors like this.

It was almost amusing, the way Umbridge's eyes widened and became akin to the bulging eyes of a toad's before her face turned white as a sheet. Of course, it didn't stay white. With each name dropped, her face turned an even more sickly shade of green... until he'd gotten to Nathaniel's name.

Nathaniel Greengrass was feared in the wizarding world. It wasn't the kind of fear that Voldemort had inspired. As a man who held nearly enough votes to break any deadlock, everyone was forced to walk on eggshells when dealing with him. Even Lucius Malfoy couldn't outright refuse a demand from the head of the Noble House of Greengrass. That was how powerful the man was.

By mentioning his name here, by stating that he was "allied" in some way

to Nathaniel Greengrass, Harry all but told Umbridge that she was interfering in house politics between him and one of the most powerful members of the nobility.

Harry decided to drive the final nail into this coffin. "Surely, you had realized that our families were thinking of formalizing an alliance? We've been discussing the matter for some time. It was believed that an alliance between the houses of Black, Bones, Greengrass, Potter, Longbottom, and Zabini would be an excellent means of securing a future for our families."

Umbridge's green face turned a shade that Harry had never seen before. He didn't even know humans were capable of gaining a hue like that.

Perhaps she really is part toad...

"I-is that so?" Umbridge stuttered, suddenly looking unsure. She took a hesitant step back. Her body shook as though she was a leaf caught within a hurricane. "Well, I suppose I can let this go for now. I wouldn't want... I do not intend to cause issues between noble houses, of course."

"We appreciate that," Harry said, masking his mocking smile behind a polite demeanor.

Because she no longer had any reason to be there, and she had just realized that everyone was staring at them, Umbridge left the Great Hall in a hurry. Harry watched her waddle away. Once she'd disappeared behind the large double doors, he sat down with a sigh.

"Um," Lisa began, "could someone please explain what just happened for those of us who aren't knowledgeable about politics?"

"It was nothing big," Daphne said. "Harry just used a basic political scare informed Umbridge that we're together because we're discussing house matters. There are several laws put in place that keep the ministry from being able to interfere in the politics of noble houses. She couldn't have done anything anyway. However, once Harry stated that the houses of Black, Bones, Greengrass, Potter, Longbottom, and Zabini were thinking of formalizing an alliance, she had no choice but to back off."

"Interfering in the business of that many noble houses, especially houses that powerful, is like committing political suicide," Blaize added. "Four of those houses are members of the Founding Five, and while the Greengrass and Zabini are only noble houses, we both have a vast range of wealth. Mum is currently the wealthiest woman in Britain, and Daphne's father is the most powerful member of the neutral families on the House of Nobles, plus an acute businessman."

"Anyone of those houses could make her life a living hell," Harry added. "If we became a true alliance of houses, we'd be one of the most feared political groups in Wizarding Britain."

"Though something like that probably won't happen," Susan added. "Even if we're friends, some of our family doesn't get along, so the possibility of us forming an alliance of houses right now is quite small."

"Sounds complicated," Hannah said, rubbing her head as though their lesson had given her a headache.

Harry shrugged. "That's politics for you."

No one could say anything to dispute that.

XoX

Although Harry had managed to curtail Umbridge for the moment, he knew that wouldn't be the end of it. This woman had a hidden agenda. No, he was sure that she was pushing someone else's agenda.

The first thing he needed to do was find out who's agenda she was pushing. That was why he had Blaize, Susan, and Neville contact their families for information on the woman. Each of those three families had different contacts in the wizarding world due to their stances, so there was a good chance that one of them would know about possible connections a specific family might have to Umbridge.

Outside of trying to figure out the new headmistress's game, Harry attended classes with everyone else. Classes weren't anything special. In Study of Ancient Runes, they were beginning to string runes together to form arrays-or at least, they were learning the theory behind it.

Runes were a language, and in order to create a magical effect, they needed to create sentences that invoked magic. A good example would be creating a jet of water. It wasn't enough to just write the characters for water. A sentence would need to be written that said something along the lines of "*Shoot a stream of water for x-distance.*"

Of course, it wasn't as easy as that. There were still rules that needed to be followed. One of those rules followed a law that was similar to conservation of mass, a principle that stated mass cannot be created or destroyed. In other words, even if someone created a runic array to shoot water a certain distance, without having water to shoot, it wouldn't do anything because there was no water. While magic could be used to conjure, that would require creating another runic array and combining the two arrays together, which opened up a whole other can of worms. It wasn't something they were learning this year.

Arithmancy was still his best elective subject, which he excelled at because the math in magic was nowhere near as complex as mundane math. If he had to give arithmancy a "difficulty level", then he would have to say that it was around the same level as basic geometry and algebra. There was nothing particularly hard about it.

There was only one real problem at the moment-outside of his normal problems. This one technically had nothing to do with him. Even so, Harry felt obligated to do something about it.

The problem was with the headmistress's new policy on not allowing students from other houses to mix. Umbridge might have been lenient with Harry and his friends. However, even though she'd made an exception for them due to their political status, others did not have the same protection. Several students had already gotten into trouble with the headmistress. Harry had seen numerous students being given detentions for just walking in the hall with students from another house.

Because he didn't want to cause a scene, or incite jealousy from others thanks to their preferential treatment, Harry and his friends spent their free time in the Chamber of Secrets. What had once been his private work room had now become a lounge.

Harry glanced around at the interior, wondering about the changes to the chamber. The large space appeared to have more in common with a house than it did a laboratory. In the center of the room were several lounge chairs and sofas centered around a coffee table, which had a chess set currently sitting on top. Underneath the furniture was a soft rug.

The lounge-like area didn't take up much space. However, next to the lounge was a fully equipped gym. Harry had bought the equipment, placed some featherweight charms on them, and brought them in his trunk. There was also the spell casting range, which was basically just a series of self-repairing dummies that people could use for target practice. His personal workspace, which consisted of a large desk that curved around to form an L shape was easily the smallest part of the chamber. Even the airspace wasn't safe since Tracey's broom track was up there.

There was also a place for studying, a long table that had been set up with thirteen chairs and had thirteen candles lying lengthwise across it. That was where Harry and the others were at the moment.

"I got a letter from Auntie," Susan said, setting the letter on the table and carefully unfolding it. "She says that Madam Umbridge is the senior undersecretary for the Minister for Magic."

"We already knew that," Tracey said, causing Susan to blush.

"What else does it say?" Lisa asked.

"Not much," Susan admitted. "It doesn't say anything about potential families that she might be allied to, at least."

The senior undersecretary was a high ranking position within the Ministry of Magic, second only to the Minister for Magic. The job of the senior undersecretary was to act as the second-in-command. They were answerable only to the Minister for Magic, granting them a great deal of power within the Ministry.

Fortunately, the Ministry wasn't all-powerful. The government was set up with two branches: The Ministry of Magic and the House of Nobles. The Ministry made sure everyone upheld the law. However, it was the House of Nobles that created the laws, and while the Minister for Magic could

also create his or her own laws, it needed to have a 2/3rds vote from the House of Nobles in order for it to be passed.

There was also the Wizengamot, but they were just the governmental body used to hold trials. They had no say when it came to the creation of laws and wizarding policies.

This gave Harry a lot of leeway. As the heir apparent to a founding house, and the godson and heir to the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black, another founding house, Harry wielded a lot of political power on his own. When combined with the Bones, Longbottom, Zabini, and Greengrass houses, that power made him almost politically untouchable.

Harry had no issues with using that power to his own benefit. There was no point in having power if a person couldn't use it. At the same time, he wanted to be careful. If it became a crutch, then he would grow complacent, which could cause irreparable damage to his reputation. It could also hurt the reputation of his allies.

Having already learned what happened when he became complacent the hard way, he had vowed to never let himself become like that again.

"What does it say about Umbridge personally?" asked Daphne.

Susan glanced back at the letter. "It says she's a spiteful troll who hates muggleborns with a passion and dislikes anyone who doesn't follow what she believes is the 'ideal wizarding life.'"

"A troll, huh?" Tracey said with a grin. "Doesn't your aunt mean a toad?"

Susan shrugged, as if to say, *"don't ask me."*

"That more or less coincides with what Gran told me," Neville said.

"Umbridge is a pureblood supremacist. She's been advocating pureblood rights ever since she attained office. She's even butted heads with Dumbledore, blocking a number of his attempts to pass laws that would help muggleborn children acclimate to wizarding society better."

"An extremist, huh?" Harry uttered with a sigh. Extremists were the worst type of people to deal with. They would never budge on their position,

even if refusing to bow down meant taking the whole world with them into hell. "Do we know who's agenda she's pushing?"

"I don't think she's pushing anyone's agenda but her own," Blaize said. "She was appointed by the Minister for Magic, who we all know is in the pocket of Lucius Malfoy. It stands to reason that Malfoy is the reason she got the position. However, Umbridge isn't the kind of person that Malfoy usually associates with. She's too fanatical."

True enough. Lucius preferred allies who were intelligent enough to get the job done, but not so intelligent that they could betray him. Umbridge didn't strike him as smart. The very fact that she'd created a policy that would cause friction in Hogwarts thanks to the current climate was proof of this.

Sitting by Tracey, Lisa frowned. "Then why would he give her the position of Hogwarts Headmistress?"

"Because she's a distraction, most likely," Harry deduced, biting on his lower lip as he thought of what he would do in his enemy's position.

"Lucius Malfoy is cunning. He's not going to use such an extreme fanatic for whatever plot he's hatching. However, using her to distract us from the real plot is exactly something that he would do."

"Then what is his game plan?" asked Terry.

"If I knew that, we could have already neutralized it," Harry said.

"Whatever the case is, I think we should deal with Umbridge first," Daphne said.

No one disagreed with her.

After finishing their homework, everyone exited the Chamber of Secrets via the only passage that no longer required parseltongue to open. Now it was just a regular door with a Fidelius charm placed over it.

Harry's last class that day was Herbology. It was a Wednesday, which was one of his shortest days. He only had four classes total.

Herbology was shared with the Ravenclaws, so Harry and Neville walked to the greenhouse with Terry and Lisa. Neville was talking Lisa's ear off about how excited he was because they would finally be dealing with Devil's Snare. Lisa listened with an indulgent smile.

Just as they were reaching greenhouse five, a heart-rending shriek split the air. A crashing noise echoed across the grounds, followed by the sound of tearing metal and shattering glass.

Several feet away, Greenhouse five exploded as the large vines of a massive plant busted through every window. The vines writhed like the tentacles of a kracken. They curled around the metal framework and then squeezed, crushing the greenhouse as though it was cheap plastic.

Harry recognized the plant. It was a Devil's Snare, but it was a dozen times bigger than the one he and his friends had dealt with in their first year.

Within several of its tentacle-like vines were people-Professor Sprout and several students that Harry recognized as seventh years. Their screams resounded across the school grounds, piercing his ears.

"What's a Devil's Snare doing out in the sun like this?!" Neville squawked. "That thing should have shriveled up by now!"

"Nevermind that," Terry snapped. "What are we supposed to do?!"

Given the situation, Harry decided to take charge. "Terry! Run and get Madam Pomfrey! Do so quickly. Lisa and Neville, you two are with me."

"Uh... right!"

Terry raced off while Neville and Lisa pulled out their wands. Harry also pulled out his wands, both his and his mother's. He'd need all the firepower he could get.

"How are we going to deal with this?" asked Lisa.

"Cast your strongest incendio," Harry instructed. "Aim inside of the warehouse."

"Got it!"

It was a testament to his growth that Neville didn't hesitate. He rushed forward like a reckless Gryffindor and cast his strongest incendio at the base of the plant, which was hidden within the barely standing greenhouse five. Several vines swooped down to try and pound Neville into the ground, but he deftly avoided them with swift leaps from side to side.

"Incendio!"

Fire burst from the tip of Neville's wand, a cylindrical cone of orange flames that slammed into the Devil Snare's middle. The monstrous plant shrieked as a conflagration spread across its body. The fire spread when Lisa joined in, attacking from a distance.

Harry used this opportunity to rescue the students and Professor Sprout. Several powerful cutting curses flew from his personal wand, which had lost its black sheen and returned to the entwined mixture of black and white wood. The cutting curses sliced into the massive vines with impunity. The seventh years and Professor Sprout shrieked as they fell. Harry then swished his mother's wand at them. Everyone falling halted in mid-air before they were jerked over to him, where they landed on the ground.

"Neville!" Harry called. "Get back!"

Instead of nodding to acknowledge the order, Neville merely hopped backwards several times, weaving past the vines as they came down. He sent several cutting curses at the vines. While it didn't lop them off-they were too thick for anything but the most powerful of spells-it did cause the vines to rear back as if in pain.

Harry had to admire his friend's movement. Their constant training really had done a wonder on Neville. He moved almost like a professional duelist.

When Neville was out of harm's way, Harry thrust his wand forward while unleashing as much magic as possible. The area in front of him roared to life. A fire nearly as wide as he was tall blasted from his wand like a

cannon. The force was such that Harry was almost lifted off the ground, but he used magic to force his feet to stick, which resulted in him sliding backwards.

The flames, an incandescent white blaze, struck greenhouse five, melting a lot of the metal before plowing into the Devil's Snare. There was no pained shriek, no flailing vines. The Devil's Snare went up in flames, which quickly spread across its surface, consuming it within seconds. When all was said and done, nothing remained. The Devil's Snare was gone and the greenhouse was standing on its last leg.

With the Devil's Snare destroyed, Harry was able to focus on the injured. Professor Sprout and the others were all in varying states of abuse. Some only had bruised skin, but there were a few who'd suffered from broken bones. Harry started mending the most serious injuries first. It was harder than he would have liked, but he contented himself with the knowledge that he didn't know any actual healing spells.

Hogwarts did not offer any books on medical spells. The reason was because healing was a branch of magic that could be fatal if not cast right. It was a dangerous magic. Even Hannah, who knew a bit about healing, only knew so much because her mother was a former mediwitch. The Ministry of Magic carefully regulated the books people could buy on healing magic. It was technically required for a witch or wizard to undergo training and receive a license before even being allowed to use healing magic.

Madam Pomfrey arrived around fifteen minutes later, and she took over Harry's job, shooing him out of the way so she could work in peace. Harry was all too happy to leave her to it. He hadn't been able to do much more than number their pain.

"What should we do now?" asked Neville. "I don't imagine we'll have class with Professor Sprout out of commission like this."

"I'm of the same mind," Harry admitted. "Should we do a self study until it's time for our next class?"

As he spoke, what remained of greenhouse five groaned and then collapsed. Harry, Lisa, Terry and Neville stared at the ruins of what had

once been where they learned about herbology. It took Harry a moment, but he eventually figured out the only thing he could have said in this situation.

"I didn't do it."

Lisa, Neville, and Terry gave him very odd looks.

XoX

Defense Against the Dark Arts was a self-study. The goal for the class was for everyone to finish writing a report on the differences between vampires and werewolves. It was a two foot long report, meaning it would take most people several weeks. Professor Antus had thought it would be a good idea if they worked on it in class, where he was available should anyone have any questions or a need for clarification.

Harry had already finished his report; Daphne, Neville, Tracey, and Blaize had also finished their reports. They had even gone ahead and turned them in. Since they were done, it meant they didn't have anything to do. Tracey and Neville were playing a quiet game of mundane poker, Blaize was reading a book of wizarding poets, and Daphne was writing in a diary. Consequently, the diary was something that Harry had bought her for Christmas.

Since he didn't want anyone knowing about his projects outside of his friends, Harry was left with nothing to do-except meditate. With his mind being what it was, he still needed to meditate every night. His occlumency had been getting a lot better. That was what he believed, at any rate. Without having a legilimens with more power and skill than him test his ability to defend against intrusions, there was no way to know for sure.

I should ask Professor Lupin if he knows legilimency.

A chill traveled down Harry's spine. He stopped meditating and opened his eyes, peering around at the people nearest him. His friends were busy doing their own thing. The others close to him were writing or reading from their text books. The chill had yet to leave. Someone was watching him.

He turned his head toward the teacher, Professor Antus, who was staring at him with unblinking eyes. The man inclined his head. It took him a moment, but he realized what the man wanted. Harry nodded back.

Class came to an end with the tolling of a bell. No one outside of his group had finished their papers, so, naturally, everyone else had it as homework. Students groaned as they stood from their seats and filed out of the room.

"Could you go on without me?" Harry asked his friends. "I need to speak with Professor Antus."

"I'm staying," Daphne said.

Tracey, Neville, and Blaise shared looks of amusement. Harry wanted to frown, but he was kind of used to this by now. No doubt, Neville would tease him later this evening.

"We'll see you two later, then," Neville said.

"Have fun," Tracey added. Blaise just offered them a nod.

"You sure you don't want to go with them?" Harry asked Daphne as their three friends vacated the room.

Daphne shook her head. "I want to stay with you."

Knowing how stubborn Daphne could be at times, Harry didn't argue with her. He accepted that she was staying.

Professor Antus frowned at Daphne when they walked up to him. However, his attention soon turned to Harry. Without waiting for him to speak, the DADA professor said, "I apologize for holding you back, but I wanted a chance to speak with you."

"That is an intriguing coincidence," Harry said. "I've been meaning to speak with you as well."

"I don't think I need to tell you that something unusual is happening within Hogwarts."

"As if we needed you telling us that," Daphne muttered under her breath.

"I believe we are probably the most aware that something isn't right at Hogwarts," Harry said before Professor Antus could berate Daphne for her sharp tongue.

"Then did you know that someone has managed to infiltrate the school?" Professor Antus asked.

Harry frowned. "Do you mean Umbridge?"

Shaking his head, the DADA professor said, "they've been here since before Umbridge."

That was... disturbing news. Harry wondered if he was talking about the person who cast that area wide illusion, or was he talking the person who'd attacked Harry?

"Do you know who they are?"

"Negative. That's why I'm talking to you." Professor Antus gestured to Harry. "You and your friends have always been in the thick of things here at Hogwarts. When something goes wrong, you're the ones who are the most involved. Since that's been the case for every year thus far, I was hoping it might be the case this time."

"I see." Harry sighed. "You were hoping we'd know something." He narrowed his eyes. "Sadly, we don't actually know anything this time."

"I see."

"And now that you've asked a question, there's something I'd like to ask you."

"Go ahead."

Harry nodded. "From my understanding, you're no longer a hit wizard, so why are you asking me about this?"

"I might not be a hit wizard anymore, but that doesn't mean I don't still

work for the Ministry of Magic," Professor Antus said. "Amelia pulled some strings with Minister Fudge when they needed someone to take the defense against the dark arts post after Remus Lupin was laid off. I was selected since I'm technically not under her payroll. She asked me to discreetly look into the incidents happening around Hogwarts. I agreed."

So that was it. Madam Bones had chosen Professor Antus because he had cut ties with the Hit Wizards, which meant no one could claim that she was trying to "subvert" the students or any such nonsense. At the same time, the professor still held loyalties to Madam Bones, which meant he could be a discreet private investigator for her.

The frown that Daphne had been wearing deepened. "But nothing had happened until after you came."

"That's where you're wrong, Ms. Greengrass," Professor Antus said. "There were several reports of people going missing near Hogsmeade as early as the first month of the new school year. The reports were made by Madam Rosmerta directly to Amelia, so the DMLE was able to keep the information from leaking to anyone else."

While Harry was disgruntled to learn that Amelia had been keeping valuable information from him, he couldn't fault her for doing so. He wasn't a member of the DMLE. He was a student. No one in their right mind, nevermind someone with a governmental position as high as hers, would ever tell a thirteen year old student about something like this. He also had to consider the fact that he had been... out of touch with the rest of the world during that time.

"Then how did you come to the conclusion that this person has infiltrated Hogwarts?" asked Harry. "It sounds like they're in Hogsmeade. That's where all of the attacks have happened."

"You mean aside from the fact that someone had Professor McGonagall deliver that letter to you? The aurors have already done a thorough sweep of Hogsmeade before the last attack." Moving around his oakwood desk, Professor Antus sat down and steepled his fingers. "The thing is, the DMLE has been in Hogsmeade since the first person went missing. They never found anything."

"You checked the surrounding forests and everything?" asked Daphne.

"They even checked the Forbidden Forest just to be safe," Professor Antus said. "Unless they went so deep into the forest that we can't track them, they aren't anywhere around Hogsmeade or the surrounding area."

Professor Antus had neglected to mention the possibility of someone apparating to Hogsmeade, but the chances of that being the case were also unlikely. Apparition left traces of magic. There were methods of tracing that magic back to the original apparition point. The only way to avoid that was to apparate somewhere people couldn't get to, like a house under the Fidelius Charm. That was how Harry had avoided detection after running from the aurors during the summer.

"You two can head off now," Professor Antus said. "Just promise me that you'll be careful. I know you guys have a habit of getting into trouble, but I want you to leave this to the professionals."

"Yes, sir," Harry said before he and Daphne left.

"What do you think?" Daphne asked as they walked down the hall.

Harry tilted his head for a moment. "I think... we shouldn't listen to the professor's suggestion."

"So we should investigate into this matter?"

"Yes."

Daphne hesitated before plowing on. "Because of what happened to Hermione?"

Last year, Harry had suggested not getting involved with the Chamber of Secrets. He'd told everyone to leave the matter to the adults. Hermione had died as a result.

"Partly," he admitted. "However, I think there's more to these attacks than mere random attacks. Maybe it's just me being paranoid, but I feel like the attack on Hogsmeade was meant specifically for us."

"But that doesn't explain the disappearances that happened before we were even allowed into Hogsmeade," Daphne said.

"No, but there might be." Harry paused to gather his thoughts. "In the Black library, there are a number of dark books. Some of them involve sacrificing people in exchange for something: power, the ability to summon a demon, and other such magics. It could be that whoever we're dealing with needed human sacrifices for similar reasons."

Daphne shuddered. "That... doesn't sound pleasant. Who would do something like that?"

"There's only one person I can think of who'd commit such heinous acts," Harry said.

His friend sucked in a breath. "Do you think we're dealing with V... Voldemort again?"

"Either him or someone like him," Harry said. "This person could be another dark lord in the making, or maybe it's someone who's been possessed by the Dark Lord like Ginny or Professor Quirrell had been."

"I'm not sure which of those prospects is more frightening," Daphne admitted.

"Me neither," Harry said.

Perhaps it was the topic, but the hallway seemed more ominous than before. Fortunately, nothing happened, and after escorting Daphne to the Slytherin's den, Harry began making his way to the Gryffindor tower.

The Gryffindor tower was on the opposite side of the Slytherin's den. Not only that, but the Slytherins were in the basement while the Gryffindors were in a tower. It meant he had to go from one side of the castle to the other while also ascending numerous staircases and traveling through multiple hallways.

As he walked down the hallway, passing by the moving suits of armor, Harry's instinct suddenly flared, warning him of imminent danger.

He reacted quickly. The sound of something cutting the air whistled in his ear. Harry leapt to the side, feeling the wind rush past him as though something was slicing the air. Loud squealing erupted from where he'd been standing, and when he looked over, it was to see that one of the swords of armor had tried cutting him in half with a sword.

What the hell?

The suit of armor stepped down from its small stand. All of the other suits in this hallway followed suit. Harry backed up, warily eying the armored suits as they walked toward him, the *clang-clang!* of their footsteps echoing along the hall.

Reaching out with his senses, Harry tried to see if he could feel any traces of magical energy. A spell was clearly being used to control these suits of armor. Yet when he felt around, all he could feel was the accumulated magic of several thousand years worth of students and teachers congregating at this school. With such an overwhelming magical force, he couldn't detect any magic being used.

This isn't good. I need to get out of this situation first. Then I can begin investigating into this further.

The suit of armor in front of him raised its axe, and Harry leapt out of the way, wincing as the massive weapon sliced into the brick wall. He moved further back. This, sadly, took him next to another armored suit, which swung its broadsword horizontally as though trying to slice off his head. He ducked, spun around, and then he sent a reinforced palm strike into the armored chestplate. It dented, bowing inward as the rest of the armor was sent flying, scattering and bouncing along the walls and floor.

Two more suits of armor rushed him. The one on his right was carrying a halberd; the one on his left a sword. Loud clattering behind him alerted to a third suit of armor. It looked like they were trying to ensnare him in a trap.

That won't work.

Harry didn't time to pull out his wands, much less cast a spell. With nothing else up his sleeve, he channeled all the magic he could into his

arms and legs. Using precisely timed bursts, he launched his magic with every punch and kick.

The two suits of armor in front of him exploded as he punched them before they could attack with their unwieldy weapons. Then he spun around, launching a precisely timed high-kick at the next armored suit's head. Not only did the helmet fly off, but the metal shattered, though that didn't stop the armor from continuing to attack him.

He sidestepped a thrust of the armor's claymore, and then spun around when another suit of armor came in from his flank, broadsword swinging. A downward swing was dodged. Harry stepped on the sword's flat end to keep it pinned. Then he launched a fist into the armored chestplate, unleashing a power burst of magic that shattered it.

Even with that suit of armor down, Harry was still in a lot of trouble. He counted at least eight more suits of armor. All of them were closing in fast.

Gritting his teeth, Harry found himself dodging a hail storm of swinging weapons. The scent of steel seared his nose. Air whistled as he swerved around, his feet shuffling in a deadly dance, while a variety of ancient weaponry came millimeters to impaling, slicing, or tearing him apart.

His flesh stung as nicks and cuts appeared along his skin. They were shallow wounds. Even so, if he accumulated enough cuts, they would eventually become debilitating. He needed to do something, and quickly.

Moving along the ground, ducking, dodging, weaving, and pirouetting, Harry danced through the attacks as he glanced at his surroundings. He searched for something, anything, that he could use as a weapon. Even a tapestry would have been appreciated at this point.

Sadly, there weren't any tapestries, but there were several portraits. The paintings inside of the portrait were all following his battle. He spared them a split second. It was long enough to yell, "Get Professor McGonagall!" Before he was forced to turn his attention back to the suits of armor.

Time seemed immemorial as he did his best to stay alive. Harry felt like

he was trapped within a haze. A red film had covered his eyes. Left. Right. Backstep. Sidestep. Spin. Harry moved and moved and kept moving. Swords and halberds, pikes and spears, all manner of melee weaponry came at him from all sides. He dodged what he could and deflected what he couldn't with his hands. It wasn't enough. More cuts appeared along his skin. Blood began to stain his robes.

For just a moment, Harry was sure that he was done for. He was tired, his breathing labored, his body stinging from the damage of hundreds of cuts, and his mind on the verge of collapsing. The suits of armor were tireless, and he was growing tired. It was just as Harry realized that he had been cornered that a miracle occurred.

"Esparro!"

He was saved. Several stakes jutted from the floor, stabbing straight through several suits of armor. This didn't stop the armor, which kept trying to move toward him. However, as if sensing this, the stakes that were piercing the armor elongated and then curved around and entangled them like elastic bindings. Armor squealed and clinked. Yet it didn't budge.

That was when Harry felt it, a massive wave of magic that washed through the area. The hairs on his neck prickled. His senses were briefly overwhelmed. Then the wave passed over him, and all of the armored suits went still. A moment of silence passed. The stakes unwrapped from around the armor and went back into the floor, and the armored suits clattered to the ground.

"Mr. Potter," a voice said, rolling the "r" in a familiar Scottish accent.

Harry turned. Standing several meters away and getting closer was Professor McGonagall. Her determined and fierce demeanor was like nothing he'd ever seen before, not on her, and the way she moved, with a predatory and feline grace, belied her age. This was not the Professor McGonagall that he remembered.

"Are you all right, Mr. Potter?"

Nodding, Harry slumped against the wall as his legs, finally out of energy,

gave out on him. Professor McGonagall flicked her wand. Harry felt a brief moment where his stomach was in his throat, and then his body became weightless. He floated through the air, toward his head of house, who slung his arm over her shoulder and began half-carrying and half-dragging him down the hall.

"I need you to do some of the walking, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said. "I cannot carry your weight by myself."

Harry grunted as he forced magic into his legs, strengthening them. It hurt. While he had plenty of magic left, he'd used so much that using anymore to enhance his muscles caused pain. "Sorry."

"It's fine. Now, come on. Let's get you to the hospital wing."

"No." Harry shook his head. "Not the hospital wing."

"Mr. Potter, you are injured."

"These injuries aren't serious. I'll heal with a good night's rest. Take me to your office, please."

Professor McGonagall didn't speak at first. Harry couldn't see her, but he could practically sense her frown.

"Very well," she sighed.

Professor McGonagall's office was located in the back of the Transfiguration classroom. After entering, she set Harry in a seat that had been situated before her desk, then walked around to the other side and sat down. Her stare, which had probably sent more children than Harry could count running, pierced his soul.

"I suppose... I should begin by telling you what happened," Harry said.

"That would be a good start."

"Right."

Since there wasn't much to tell, Harry's recounting of how he'd been

ambushed and attacked was short. Professor McGonagall still listened to his words despite this. When he finished speaking, the frown that she'd been wearing had become a thin line.

"I still find it hard to believe that you were attacked by someone who had infiltrated the school," Professor McGonagall stated. "It's even more hard to believe that they managed to set those suits of armor on you. Our armor has several defense mechanisms that activate when the school believes that someone is a threat to the safety of the students, so it shouldn't have attacked you."

Harry was actually aware of the defensive magics surrounding the armor. Nicholas Flamel had told him that those suits of armor were souls that had been stripped of their identity and encased in the armored suits. It was a punishment that had been used for the vilest of criminals. This was back during the Founder's era, long before Azkaban had been a prison.

"Do you think someone could have used a spell to make the magic activate when I walked passed it?" Harry asked.

Professor McGonagall bit her lip. "There are methods of remotely activating a spell, putting it on a timer, and even setting it to activate upon being tripped by a specific magic presence. However, such methods are more advanced than anything taught at Hogwarts. Only someone with Headmaster Dumbledore's level of knowledge could do something like that."

So they were dealing with someone who was as knowledgeable as the headmaster? Harry would have liked say that narrowed down his suspects quite a bit, but in truth, all it did was throw him off. He knew of no one outside of Voldemort with that kind of knowledge.

Voldemort wasn't in Hogwarts. He couldn't be. Even with the headmaster gone, the defenses he'd put in place, which kept disembodied spirits attached to the back of people's heads from entering the school, still remained.

Did this mean there was a new enemy?

"Mr. Potter?" Professor McGonagall said.

"Is it possible to keep quiet about what happened?" Harry asked. "I know that sounds like an unreasonable request, but since we don't know who attacked me, letting everyone know what's going on might incite a panic."

"I was actually going to suggest the same thing," the stern professor admitted.

"R-really?"

"Indeed. It is not wise for us to let everyone know about what happened yet. Since we don't have a plan of action, letting everyone else know may cause your attacker to panic and react in a manner we can't predict. I was going to suggest that you keep quiet for the time being."

"Do you have a plan?" Harry asked.

"Not at present, but I'll discreetly speak with Filius and the others to see if I can come up with a plan to locate the person responsible for this," Professor McGonagall said, standing to her feet. "Now, then, I'm going to escort you to the Gryffindor Tower. Since we don't know if that person will attack again, it's dangerous for you to be by yourself."

"Right."

Harry sighed. He'd been nearly at the Gryffindor Tower before being attacked, and now he had to travel all the way up there again?

This was turning out to be some day.

The plot is thickening, and Harry is being assaulted more blatantly than before. Who is responsible for these attacks? What do they want? Will the world ever discover the joy that is canned cheese? Find out next time on Dragon Ball-I mean, find out next time on Harry Potter and the Ties that Bind!

Societal Dangers

Chapter 20

Societal Dangers

Harry was really sore the day after being ambushed. His body ached, his skin was bruised, and he had lost quite a bit of blood. Despite having spent the entire night healing his bruises and cuts, it didn't change how his body felt like it had been put through several rounds with a champion kick boxer.

"I can't believe someone attacked you on your way to the Gryffindor tower," Susan said in astonishment.

It was breakfast, and everyone was sitting around the Gryffindor table in their usual positions. Harry had a large plate of pancakes, French toast, eggs, muffins, and orange juice. He normally didn't eat so many carbohydrates, but he'd exhausted his magic last night and needed to replenish. While not a well-known fact, food, like rest, was a great way to help replenish lost magic.

"I'm sorry," Daphne apologized. "You were attacked because you walked me to my dorm. If you hadn't—"

"If I hadn't, then I wouldn't have gotten such valuable information," Harry interrupted. "Please don't apologize. Not only was this incident not your fault, but I learned a lot."

Tracey made a face. "What could you have possibly learned from nearly getting killed?"

"I'm with her." Terry pointed at Tracey.

Harry chuckled. "Because it shows how desperate the person who's trying to kill me is getting. It also tells me that the person who created that area wide illusion at Hogsmeade is the same one who tried to bury me

under the Shrieking Shack."

"How do you figure that?" asked Lisa.

"Deductive reasoning," Harry replied. "First off, there have been three attacks in several weeks. Each time there has been an attack, I was there, either as the one being attacked, or as part of a group that was attacked. Now, when you look at it like this, how many people do you think there can be that would so blatantly launch attacks of this nature?"

Lisa hesitated for a moment. "... One?"

Nodding, Harry lifted his hand and raised a single finger. "That's right. One. There aren't many people who would attack others like this. If there was more than one psychopathic killer on the loose, then it would mean the DMLE isn't doing their job, which I know for a fact that they are."

"So, there's no possibility that the attacks on you and the attack at Hogsmeade were separate incidents?" Blaize asked.

"I doubt it. I mean, it is possible, but the chances of these attacks being perpetrated by two separate people is unlikely."

"You mentioned this person being desperate," Neville prodded. "How do you figure they're getting desperate?"

"Because of the nature of their attacks," Harry answered. "Their first attack was a lot more subtle. They tricked Professor McGonagall into giving me a letter that had me travel out to where no one else was located, and then attempted to kill me. Granted, dropping a building on me isn't subtle, but the Shrieking Shack is old, so it would have been easy to make it look like an accident had I died. The second attack wasn't as subtle, but it was still a brilliant method of assassination. By casting an area wide illusion that affected everyone within a certain radius, they made it look more like a terrorist attack than an assassination."

Harry paused to make sure everyone was following him. Tracey and Terry were leaning forward, and Hannah, Lisa, Astoria, and Ginny were staring at him. Luna looked at him for but a moment before going back to whatever she was reading—the Quibbler, it looked like. Even Blaize was

looking right into his eyes. Underneath the table, Harry felt a hand gripping his robes. That would be Daphne.

He continued. "If I had died then, I would've just been another casualty. It would've been big, sure, but no one would have believed that I was the target all along. However, the last attack was an all-out assault on just me. Not only that, but they attacked me inside of Hogwarts. There are hundreds of students and numerous faculty, and that's not accounting for the many portraits, several of which witnessed the attack. This person has all but said I'm their target. Now that the staff and portraits know, everyone is going to be extra alert."

"Which means the chances are taking you out have decreased," Daphne said suddenly, clarity entering her voice.

"Right." Harry nodded.

"Sounds like this assassin has screwed the pooch," Tracey said.

It was just as his friend had said. They had, indeed, "screwed the pooch". However, the assault had also revealed something else, which he didn't mention. Whoever had attacked them was not a professional assassin. They were intelligent, insanely so perhaps, but someone experienced in assassination knew never to let desperation fuel their attempts.

"Ahem. Excuse me," Madam Umbridge's familiar voice said from behind them. "I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. Mr. Potter, I would like to see you in my office after breakfast."

Harry froze, but he quickly mastered himself and smiled. "Of course, Headmistress Umbridge. I'll head over to the headmistress office once breakfast is finished."

"Very good."

As the headmistress walked off, Harry pondered what her request meant. Was he going to be in trouble for last night? No, that couldn't be it. Umbridge knew of the political power he wielded. The likelihood of her trying to get him in trouble were almost nil. There had to be another reason.

"Harry, are you really going to meet with Umbridge?" asked Susan.

"I don't have much choice." He shrugged. "She is the headmistress. That said, Daphne, would you mind accompanying me?"

"You say that as if I wasn't planning to accompany you in the first place," Daphne said, shrugging. She and Harry shared a smile.

"U-um." A blushing Susan looked at the two of them. "Would you mind if I... went with you?"

"Not at all," Daphne said before Harry could answer. "In fact, as the niece of Amelia Bones, your presence might help."

A look of relief washed over Susan. Harry discreetly glanced back and forth between the two girls as they began speaking. He was clearly missing something.

I'll never understand girls.

XoX

Harry, along with Daphne and Susan, headed to the headmistress's office. It had changed a lot since he'd last been there.

Pink. That was the first thing he noticed upon entering the headmistress's office. Blinding, bright, disgusting, and mind-scarring pink. It was everywhere. The walls, the ceiling, even the floor was pink. If that was all, then perhaps Harry could have handled it. However, on top of every millimeter of the room being pink, the walls were also covered in kitty portraits. They were all over the place. Meowing kitties, kitties licking their paws, kitties playing with each other. It was a regular kitten-palooza.

Harry almost lost his mind. No sane person would have a room like this. It was... he didn't even think horrendous could accurately describe this place.

Daphne and Susan appeared to be of like mind. They were clutching his hands as though they were lifelines.

Sitting behind the headmistress's desk, which was also pink, Umbridge looked up and smiled. "Ah, Mr. Potter... and Ms. Greengrass and Bones." The smile left for a brief moment, but it was soon put back in place, though there was a noticeable twitch. "I had not realized you two were coming as well."

Harry quickly mastered himself. "My apologies, Headmistress. I asked them to come because your rule forbade anyone from wandering around on their own."

Umbridge's lips became pursed, as though she had swallowed a lemon. "Yes, well... I suppose it can't be helped. However, you and I have much to discuss. Since they came together, they can also leave while I speak with you."

"But Headmistress," Daphne intervened smoothly. "If we left Harry now, he wouldn't have anyone to walk with him and would end up breaking your rule." Before the headmistress could open her mouth, Daphne continued. "I'm also sure that a woman as busy as yourself can't afford to walk him all the way to his next class. It would be quite rude of us to force you into doing something like that."

Umbridge remained still for a moment. She could dispute Daphne's words, but doing so would mean going against the daughter of the Greengrass family. From a purely political standpoint, it was reckless—no, it went beyond reckless. It was the dumbest thing someone could do.

"Y-you bring up a good point," Umbridge said, her smile becoming fixed. "However, I still need to speak with Mr. Potter alone."

Daphne opened her mouth again, but Harry beat her. "It's okay, Daph. Why don't you and Susan wait outside."

"Are you sure?" Susan asked. "We don't mind staying with you."

Gracing them both with a smile, Harry said, "I'm sure."

Sighing, Daphne relented. "Very well. However, my father is quite interested in what happens to you, so please be sure to let me know if something happens during your conversation," she said loudly enough

for Umbridge to hear, but soft enough that it sounded like she hadn't meant Umbridge to hear

Harry almost chuckled at the woman's pale face. "Don't worry. I will."

When Susan and Daphne left, Harry walked up to Umbridge and offered a respectful inclination of his head. "I apologize for the issue just now. You said that you wished to speak with me?"

"Yes, that is correct." Umbridge coughed into her hand. "I've heard that you were attacked last night."

For a moment, Harry wondered how she'd heard of this. Could she have orchestrated the attack? The thought fled as quickly as it came. No, she couldn't have been the one behind this. Aside from the attacks happening before she'd arrived, Umbridge lacked the capacity and the motive to assassinate him. That meant there was another reason.

"I was."

"You were alone?"

"To my shame," Harry admitted. "I had walked Daphne back to the Slytherin dorm, but there was no one left to walk me to the Gryffindor tower."

Umbridge, much to Harry's surprise, nodded. "That's good. It was quite noble of you to escort Ms. Greengrass back to her dorm. I'm also pleased to see that you aren't injured yourself."

While he was trying to figure out Umbridge's angle, Harry replied, "thank you. It was quite the harrowing experience, but fortunately, I was saved by a passing teacher before the situation could take a turn for the worst."

"Yes, you were quite fortunate, which leads me to my point." Coughing into her hand, the toad-like woman said, "as an important member of the wizarding world, it is imperative that you remain safe at all times. I'd like to ask that you not do something like this again."

It took Harry a moment, but like a flash of lightning, he realized what was

going on. Umbridge was a toady. She wasn't a leader, but a follower who clung to the most powerful person she could. At Hogwarts, the one with all of the political power was him, ergo, Umbridge was butt kissing him. She was trying to ingratiate herself to him. It was so obvious that he was kicking himself for missing it. That said...

I can use this.

"You're correct, Headmistress. It pains me, but I wasn't being cautious enough. It's a mistake that I won't make again."

The headmistress seemed awfully pleased, as her beaming smile suggested. "Excellent. I am so pleased that you see things my way."

"Oh, yes." Harry nodded emphatically. "I certainly understand why following the rules is so important now, and in fact, I was just thinking of how this school could be much safer if we added a few more rules."

"Truly?" Umbridge said, appearing curious.

"Yes. Not only would these rules help keep the students safe, but they'd also hold the benefit of making you the most beloved headmistress to ever hold this position."

Now Umbridge was leaning forward. "Is that so? What are these suggestions of yours?"

Hook. Line. Sinker.

With a polite smile, Harry gave Umbridge the same speech that he had given to Walburga's portrait, and then he suggested several rules to help implement them.

He may or may not have used a bit of magic to make Umbridge a tad more agreeable.

XoX

Several policy changes were implemented at Hogwarts.

The most shocking was the promotion of inter-house relationships, which was one of the many topics that Harry had spoken to Umbridge about. Using his alliance with the Greengrass, Zabini, and Bones households, Harry had convinced Umbridge of the benefits to inter-house relationships. There may have also been a small threat placed in there along with a slight magical impulse.

This change in policy had resulted in the re-opening of the All-House Common Room. Several rules had been put in place, such as students had to be walking with members of their house when leaving the common room. However, there had been no rules stating that students of other houses couldn't walk together. This meant students had to walk in groups of at least four if they were with someone from another house.

It was killing two birds with one stone, as far as Harry was concerned.

The other policies that had been changed were mere minor suggestions. They did nothing in the long run. Harry had merely used them as a means of disguising his agenda from Umbridge.

To further enhance the reputation of this policy, and to increase Umbridge's "fame", Harry had used Andromeda to discreetly send the Daily Prophet the information about these changes. With the letter was a generous sum of money, along with the "suggestion" that they paint her policies in the best light possible.

Which explained why the front page of the Daily Prophet that morning had been titled: *Headmistress Umbridge Takes the Reigns and Heals Hogwarts! By Castain Barbage.*

Good things are happening at Hogwarts, ladies and gentlemen. Since Headmaster Dumbledore's resignation from the position, Headmistress Umbridge has become a beacon of hope for the students of Hogwarts. She's enacted new policies to help better the school and ensure the safety of the children.

These policies include the rule that students may not walk alone on their way to class. This was done as a method of ensuring that students always have someone with them in the event of an unprecedented attack.

On top of being of helping keep students safe, she has begun to implement policies to help expand inter-house relationships. Rumor has it that the suggestion came from Lucius Malfoy, who was the person that helped put Headmistress Umbridge in the position as headmistress in the first place.

The article went on to praise the headmistress and Lucius Malfoy for their insight and desire to help keep the children at Hogwarts safe. The praise it offered was quite lavish indeed.

Blaize put down his paper and gestured to it. "I'm guessing this is your doing?"

Harry smiled as jotted down some notes on his homework assignment for Snape. It was a revision essay on one of the more complicated potions they were learning. "I don't know what you're talking about?"

"Right," Blaize said, holding back a chuckle. "I have to admit, this was a pretty brilliant move. I haven't received a letter from Mum yet, but I'm sure I'll get one soon enough telling me to praise you."

"Is something going on?" asked Tracey.

It was lunch time, but rather than going to the Great Hall, they were all eating their lunch down in the Chamber of Secrets. Susan and Hannah had asked the house elves to make them something. Then they brought it down for everyone. This was done not just so they could speak in private, but also so they could work on their homework while they ate.

"Harry has just done something that I can't figure out whether it was crazy brilliant or just plane crazy," Daphne said.

"It's definitely crazy brilliant," Blaize said. "Not only did he have the Daily Prophet make the headmistress out to be a saint, but he implied that the reason was because Lucius had put her up to it."

"I did no such thing," Harry said. "I found out through the grapevine that Lucius was the one who managed to get Umbridge installed as our headmistress in the first place. This was done all under his suggestion. It's only natural that the Daily Prophet would conclude that he was the

one responsible for having her implement these new changes that promote inter-house relationships."

"But doesn't that paint Lucius in a good light?" asked Lisa.

"Not if you're a dark family," Daphne said. "Many of the policies that Umbridge put in place are ones that no dark family would agree with. That it's been rumored to have been done on Lucius's suggestion means he's betrayed the dark family factions that have allied with him. He'll be in hot water for awhile. Of course, that means he's going to have his hands tied placating his allies."

"It might also make him act rashly," Harry said.

This had been done with the purpose of keeping Lucius in check. Sirius had told him about what had happened during the meeting several months ago, when Lucius Malfoy had been attacked by several light side families. The members might have been imperiused, but it didn't change how Lucius's prestige had skyrocketed as a result. Now he was being hailed as the "savior of Hogwarts", but he'd taken a hit from his allies for that very reason, or he would be taking the hit soon enough.

He would have to do something, and soon, or his reputation would continue to plummet in the eyes of his peers.

There was a chance that he would use this to his advantage by stating that he was trying to get on everyone's good side, but that ran the risk of him being required to do something to prove his words. Lucius Malfoy owned the largest dark family voting block. However, that didn't mean his allies wouldn't turn on him if he didn't support their cause. One of them might even decide to stab him in the back, either figuratively or literally.

Harry had asked Sirius to keep an eye on him during House of Noble meetings. He didn't expect anything to happen there, though. If Lucius made a move, it would be in a backdoor deal with someone, away from prying eyes.

The ball was now in Lucius's court. All Harry could do was prepare himself for the incoming volley.

"Oi, Harry!" Tracey shouted. "Why are you staring into space? Come over here and help me! I can't figure out what Flitwick is asking us to do."

Harry sighed, and then he stood up.

"All right. What are you having trouble with?"

"The whole thing."

He sighed again. His work was never finished, or so it seemed.

XoX

Nothing happened for the next several weeks. It was the middle of spring, March to be exact, and everything had become bright and green again. The chill of winter had vanished completely, leaving only the crisp freshness that came from a new season.

Harry had remained diligent, and not just on his studies. He'd been expecting something to happen soon, though what that something was, he didn't know. Yet a month had passed since his article on Lucius and Umbridge, and nothing had happened. There had been no announcements, no attacks, nothing. Harry wasn't sure what he had been expecting. However, silence was not one of them.

Umbridge either didn't read the news, or hadn't been informed of what was happening. She was soaking up the adoration of the students. It seemed as if her popularity had gone to her head. That might make her harder to control, but Harry believed the benefits outweighed the cons. If she was busy dealing with students, then it meant she would have less time to bother him and his friends.

That morning was the same as any other. Harry had been sitting with his friends, discreetly watching Umbridge as she made her rounds before sitting down at the faculty table. On his suggestion, the "headmistress" had started to make daily rounds at each table during breakfast, lunch, and dinner. He had told her that talking to the students would help her get a feel for how they were responding to her policy changes. Thus far, not only had it worked, but Umbridge had taken to it well.

She really is a toadie...

Perhaps it was because she had grown so comfortable in her position as Senior Undersecretary, but Madam Umbridge didn't seem to have any real ambition. Although, thinking on it, maybe she simply liked the position that was second from the top because it gave her power without giving her the same responsibilities that came from being Minister for Magic. That didn't answer the question of why she had become the headmistress, though.

I suppose it doesn't matter. In the grand scheme of things, Umbridge is just a pawn. She's here to distract people from Lucius Malfoy's real objective.

The problem was finding out what that objective was. Sirius hadn't reported anything suspicious happening at the House of Noble meetings. Of course, it wasn't like Harry had expected Lucius to make any under the table plays there. No, if Lucius had a hidden agenda, it would be done where no one else was looking, and he wouldn't know about it until after it had already happened. In other words, being proactive was going to be impossible. He'd have to be reactive.

I hate being forced to react to a situation. It's much better to stop something from happening before it can happen.

"Hey, Harry," Blaize started. He was sitting next to Tracey and had a large plate of pancakes in front of him. "Do you mind if I asked you to practice dueling with me after classes today?"

Harry came to himself again. He didn't even think before nodding. "Sure thing. I could probably do with a sparring partner myself."

"Heh?" Tracey gave Blaize a rather unappealing grin. "What's this? Baize is working to improve his dueling skills? Now I've seen everything."

While Blaize sometimes took part in the "games" that Harry concocted to help increase his friend's magical talents and reflexes, more often than not, he opted to sit out. Harry got the feeling that he was like his mother. Blaize probably preferred subterfuge and misdirection than outright confrontation.

Rather than get agitated, Blaize shrugged in a nonchalant manner befitting his personality. "I've become aware that you can't always rely on getting others to fight for you. There might come a time when I have to use my own skills instead of someone else's."

"That's a mature way of looking at things," Daphne said. "It's also true. We should be prepared for anything, especially since Harry is a trouble magnet."

Harry froze.

"That's true," Hannah agreed. "Harry's always getting into trouble of some kind."

"I think half the stuff that happens to us is because of Harry," Tracey added her own input.

"I'm sorry about that," Harry apologized quietly. "I know I've gotten us into a lot of dangerous situations. It wasn't my intention, but I can't deny that."

Everyone present suddenly paled. Before Harry could speak again, Tracey was waving her hands in front of her face as though warding off a fly.

"No, no! It's okay! I didn't mean that in a bad way! Well, I mean, getting into trouble isn't good, but it's like, ya know, we don't mind if trouble follows you everywhere you go, so, yeah... I'm just gonna shut up now."

"That is a sound decision," Daphne said. "I'm glad to know you can figure out when you're putting your foot in your mouth."

Tracey's slumped shoulders were reminiscent of someone weighed down by lead weights. "That's a harsh thing to say."

"It's also true," Terry said.

"No one asked you, Boot!" Tracey snapped.

Classes went by slowly that day, which Harry realized was because he'd already finished all of his work. In some ways, he and his friends were

ahead of the game. This meant that he didn't really have anything to do in class. He spent most of his time either meditating while the teachers lectured them, or creating transmutation circles within his mind. By the time classes were over, he was more than happy to head down to the Chamber of Secrets and practicing dueling with Blaize.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Harry dodged a jet of red light that flew from the tip of Blaize's wand. His friend followed the spell up with an *Impedimentia*, trying to chain the two spells together. Sadly, it wasn't a seamless chain. *Expelliarmus* was signified by the wand movements of a diagonal downward arc, and then following through with a clockwise spiral that went inward and a thrust. Meanwhile, *Impedimentia* was cast by a simple slashing motion. While it was possible to chain *Impedimentia* with *Expelliarmus*, the opposite wasn't possible. It made Blaize's spell chain clumsy.

After dodging the first spell, Harry slipped around the second. He then aimed his wand at the floor around Blaize's feet and called out, "*Augmenti!*" Water spouted from the tip, splashing all over the floor around his opponent's feet. Harry then quickly chained *Augmenti* with *Incarcerous*. Blaize did his best to move out of the way, but with the floor so wet and slippery, not only could he not dodge, but he slipped as well. The result ended with Blaize bound by rope and lying on the wet floor.

"You need to be more wary of the spells you're using," Harry said as he undid the binding spell and dried off Blaize and the floor with a drying charm. "You can't just cast randomly. Certain spells can't be chained together because the wand movements don't flow together as smoothly. It takes more time to cast them since you have to get your wand into position after casting the previous spell. You want to chain together spells where each wand movement flows into the next one."

"Like you did with your *augmenti* and *incarcerous* spells." Blaize nodded as he stood up, wincing. He must have fallen on his hip. Harry wouldn't be surprised if his friend was sporting a bruise the next morning.

"That's right." He nodded. "The *augmenti* spell's wand movement works well with the *incarcerous*. However, the reverse isn't true. An *incarcerous*

wouldn't be a good first spell to use since it would mean having to add an extra wand motion to cast the *augmenti*."

"I think I understand," Blaize murmured, cupping his chin. "A spell that can be cast immediately after the first without adding an extra motion to my wand makes it more efficient."

"Right, and that's why we call it a chain spell."

"How can I properly cast chains, though?" Blaize frowned. "It's not like I'll be able to think up chains in the middle of a fight."

"True, but if you create chains in advance and practice them until they become second nature, you'll be able to use them during a duel without thinking about it."

"Makes sense. Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Since it seemed they were done sparring, Harry wandered over to the lounge and sat on the couch. Daphne and Astoria were sitting together. It looked like they were talking about something, though Astoria, who'd been doing most of the talking, clammed up when he arrived.

"Don't stop on my account," Harry said. "You can keep conversing."

"If you're sure." Astoria shrugged and turned back to her sister. "So, like I was saying, Sirius Black is a total hunk—"

"You're doing that to upset me, aren't you?" he interrupted.

Astoria turned her head and smiled at him. "I've no idea what you're talking about."

"Right." Harry sighed.

"I'm surprised to see Blaize working so hard at something that requires him to exercise," Daphne said before her sister could make a snarky remark.

"Is that really so unusual?" Harry asked. He'd never seen Blaize spar outside of their games of magic tag, and while he did sometimes sit out, he'd never struck Harry as being lazy.

Daphne nodded. "Blaize doesn't like getting his hands dirty. When we were younger, every time one of the other noble children picked a fight with him, Blaize would never outright fight with them. He'd convince someone else to fight them for him, usually by spreading a few well placed rumors."

Being a neutral family, Blaize's and Daphne's parents ran in some of the same circles, so it was only natural that they would know each other from a young age. He also wasn't surprised to learn that Blaize had always been the sort to fight indirectly. Even so, it did surprise him that he'd been like that even when they were younger.

It must be his mother's influence.

While he sat with Astoria and Daphne, the others were located around the table. Neville and Terry appeared to be doing homework, but it looked like Tracey, Lisa, Luna, and Hannah were playing a game of Exploding Snaps. Of course, Harry only knew this because he could see something exploding in poor Tracey's face. The other three laughed at her.

"Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up," she grumbled. "You won't be laughing after my big comeback."

"You say that all the time," Hannah said.

"Whatever."

"I think Tracey has more nargles than usual."

"I don't even know what that means!"

Because it was already evening, they weren't able to remain in the Chamber of Secrets for long. Dinner was coming soon. They left about two hours after arriving. As they were traveling down the main hall, several figures followed them through the portraits.

"Okay," Terry mumbled, "that's kind of creepy."

"I'm with you, Boot. What the bloody hell are they following us for?" asked Tracey.

Daphne didn't say anything, but her sigh told Harry what he needed to know. If Tracey had been in reach of her hand, there was little doubt that she would have suffered a slight concussion.

"I wonder if something's happened?" Lisa said.

"You mean like another attack?" asked Tracey.

"Yeah."

"I thought the person attacking was after Harry," Neville said with a frown. "If they're after Harry, why would they attack someone else?"

"Who knows." Tracey shook her head and gave him a helpless gesture.

As they were turning a corner, Professors McGonagall and Flitwick rushed around a corner several meters out. They turned their heads, and, spotting them, made a beeline for the group.

"Where have you lot been?" asked Professor McGonagall. Her voice sounded more harried than Harry was used to. There was an urgency in it that he rarely heard.

"Uh... we were just studying," Harry said. "Why? Did you need us for something?" Harry frowned. "Has something happened?"

"Yes, something has happened," Professor McGonagall stated. "I need all of you to return to your common rooms immediately."

It didn't look like now was the time to argue, so Harry and the others said their goodbyes and parted ways. Yet even as he, Astoria, and Neville walked up to the Gryffindor common room, he couldn't help but wonder.

What happened that has Professor McGonagall so spooked?

XoX

Amelia sat behind her desk. It was late, but she still had a lot of work to do. The recent string of disappearances in London had increased, although it looked like the killer had changed locations again. This time they were on the opposite side of London, leading Amelia to believe that whoever the killer was, they must have been a witch or wizard. The only way anyone could have changed locations so quickly was if they used apparition or a portkey.

She had several of her best aurors on the case, including Kingsley and his partner, Tonks. While Tonks was still wet behind the ears, Kingsley had been an auror for over two decades, and he'd fought bravely during the war against Voldemort and his Death Eaters. The number of times he had saved her life was uncountable. If it weren't for him, she'd have probably died after her husband had been killed.

Some people had once joked about how Kingsley had been her rebound. Those people were fools. There had never been any romance between her and Kingsley, just a respect between two people who had fought together during one of the worst wars in recent history.

Rubbing her eyes, Amelia tried to decide whether or not she should take a pepperup potion. She had several on hand. However, they had a notorious habit of causing people to crash when taken in excess, and she'd already had two.

It was while she debated on the merits of downing another pepperup potion that something happened; someone called her by name.

"Amelia," a voice crackled from the fireplace. "Amelia Bones."

Standing up, Amelia moved around her desk, and walked past the table to her feet. Her feet padded along the soft carpet as she wandered past a comfortable looking couch, which she used quite often to sleep on when she stayed overnight at her office. Finally, she reached the fireplace and knelt down.

"Professor McGonagall," Amelia said in surprise. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

The haggardness of Professor McGonagall's face was visible even through the flame. Sunken eyes. Hollow cheeks. It was enough to worry Amelia.

"Has something happened?"

"Indeed, something has happened." Professor McGonagall sighed. "I know you have been busy, but would it be possible for you to come over to Hogwarts? I'd rather not speak of this using the floo. Someone might be able to overhear us."

While it was a unique skill, there was a magical ability known as "floo tapping". By following the magic pathways that connected one fireplace to another with a thread generated from the tip of a wand, a person could overhear a specific conversation. Talented witches and wizards could even link their wand to multiple fireplaces at once.

It was a constant worry for Amelia. As head of the DMLE, there were always people trying to tap her fireplace. Since floo tapping created only a thin, invisible thread, it was nearly impossible to detect, and no one had been able to create an enchantment that blocked people from tapping someone else's fireplace.

That said, a tap would be disconnected once a floo call ended, and it wasn't like anyone would know when Amelia was receiving a floo call. Still, there was always the risk of someone overhearing something potentially disastrous. That was the reason she never spoke of anything that could cause problems if they came to light over the floo.

Amelia glanced longingly at her pepperup potion sitting on her desk, sighed, and then said, "that's fine. I'll be right over."

She arrived at Hogwarts five minutes later. The floo network had been connected to the headmaster's office... which was a disgusting shade of pink and full of kittens. Amelia would've shuddered in revulsion, but something about the room stopped her cold.

The two corpses.

One of them was, quite clearly, Madam Umbridge. The woman was

sitting at her desk, slumped over as if she'd fallen asleep. Her face was turned toward Amelia, however, and it looked nothing like someone peacefully dreaming the day away. Wide eyes stared soullessly at nothing. Her mouth was agape and slack, as though all the muscles in her jaw had inexplicably relaxed. What's more, her face held the deathly palor of a corpse.

The other corpse was Androgeus Antus, the person that she had convinced Minister Fudge to let become the DADA teacher after Remus's forced resignation. Unlike Umbridge, he was lying on the floor. He was on his back. There was a wand lying beside him.

Madam Pomfrey was leaning over Antus and casting a slew of spells. Some of them Amelia recognized, but most of them she couldn't make heads or tails out of. They were likely diagnoses spells to figure out the cause of death.

Amelia closed her eyes and counted to ten.

"Professor McGonagall, can you tell me what happened here?"

Professor McGonagall sighed and looked at Madam Pomfrey. "What have you discovered?"

Standing up, Madam Pomfrey offered a quick summary of her findings. "Both of them were killed by the killing curse. The one who cast it appears to have been Professor Antus. I've checked his wand's history, and it looks like he cast the killing curse twice, which leads me to believe he cast it once on Madam Umbridge and once on himself."

Amelia couldn't believe her ears. "There's no way Antus would do that. I know him. He abhorred killing. It's why he quit being a Hit Wizard."

"It's possible that he was imperiused," Madam Pomfrey said, though she didn't sound convinced. "However, the magic from the killing curse wiped out all traces of foreign magic."

Amelia wanted to tear her hair out. Instead, she pinched the bridge of her nose.

She didn't believe that Antus had killed himself; the very idea was preposterous. More than likely, Madam Pomfrey's idea that he'd been imperiused was spot on. The question was: Who had impressed him and why?

I wonder...

"Where are the students?" Amelia asked.

"In their house common rooms," Professor McGonagall said. "We had them all sent there as soon as we found these two like this."

"Bring them all out," Amelia said. "Take them to the Great Hall."

Professor McGonagall looked at her with wide eyes. "What? Why?"

"Because one of them isn't a student," Amelia said.

Her proclamation brought a stunned silence, broken only by the meowing of the kittens. Neither of the professors seemed capable of making heads or tails of her statement. They stared at her with uncomprehending eyes.

Amelia became impatient. "What are you two waiting for? Go now! Get the students into the Great Hall before something happens to them!"

"Yes," Professor McGonagall said at last. "You're right. Madam Pomfrey, inform Filius and Severus that they are to take their students to the Great Hall. I'll tell Professor Sprout while I'm on my way to the Gryffindor tower."

"I'll inform Professor Sprout," Amelia said. "I still know the way to the Hufflepuff's den."

Professor McGonagall didn't argue. "Very well."

As they left the headmaster's office, all three of them split ways. Amelia rushed to the Hufflepuff den. Time was of the essence. They needed to hurry. Otherwise they ran the risk of letting whoever their perpetrator was go free.

XoX

No one knew what was going on. Even so, everyone knew that something had happened.

All of the students had been sent straight to their dorms by their Head of Houses, even the seventh years and people who had been attending class. The Gryffindor Common Room was filled to the brim with people. Everyone was either sitting or standing in clumps, chatting as they tried to figure out what was going on.

Harry was sitting on the couch with Neville and Astoria. While Neville was reading a book on dueling and wand care, Harry was helping Astoria with her homework. Most people probably wouldn't have, not with the way Astoria treated him, but he wanted to get on her good side. Also, she was still Daphne's sister.

"No one actually knows who, precisely, created the disarming charm," Harry said. "The sad truth is that there's so much mixed information that it's unlikely any of our books are correct. Some historians have claimed the spell was invented by Merlin himself, while others believe its first widespread use was in Madagascar during the eleventh century."

Astoria's homework was a one foot long revision on the history of the disarming charm, *expelliarmus*. She'd come to Harry asking him to help her check her facts by telling her what he knew of the spell. While he lectured her on the disarming charm's history, Astoria was reading from her parchment, eyes scrolling as though she were following his lecture on paper.

"Regardless of whether or not any of this is true, the fact remains that this spell didn't become popular until it was used by Elizabeth Smudgling in duel during the twenty-sixth annual dueling championship in 1379."

Astoria frowned. "I don't have any information on Elizabeth Smudgling."

"You'd need to read her biography for more information on her," Harry said.

Biting her lip for a moment, Astoria eventually nodded. "I still need three more inches, so I think adding information about her would be a good idea."

"Smart choice," Harry agreed. "I did the same thing for my essay on the disarming charms history last year."

"Really... in that case, maybe I won't add information about her."

"Then how will you add three extra inches?"

Astoria huffed and crossed her arms. "I'll find something else to write about."

Hiding what must have been a smile behind his book, Neville said, "You two act a lot like a pair of bickering siblings."

"Wha—" Astoria's eyes bulged before narrowing. "We do not! There's no way I'd ever act like this jerkwad's sister."

"You know if I married Daphne, I'd become your brother, don't you?" Harry said. "And weren't you trying to convince me that I should marry her?"

Astoria's cheeks flared up. "T-that's different..."

"How so?"

"It just is, okay!"

As they continued to chatter, someone walked down the stairs from the girl's dormitory. It was Ginny. She looked around, clutching a hand to her chest, and then spotted them over by the fireplace. She made a beeline for them, weaving her way between the numerous people who were also sitting around.

"Harry," Ginny said hesitantly. "Can I... talk to for a moment?"

Frowning at the uncertainty in the girl's voice, he stood up and gestured at her. "Sure. What's up?"

"Can you hold onto this for me?"

"Huh?"

Harry frowned when something was thrust into his hands. It didn't look like anything special. It was just a small book, similar in many ways to a diary. It was pink and had white polka dots. There really wasn't anything particular about its appearance.

The hair on his arms prickled. A thrill ran down his spine. His fingers tingled as though he'd experienced an electric shock.

This is—!

Harry didn't even get to finish that thought before he felt a tug on his navel, like a hook that had suddenly wrapped around him and yanked. The world became distorted, blurry. All he could see were Ginny's green eyes and the not-quite-right smile on her face.

His feet suddenly slammed into hard ground. Unprepared, Harry fell forward. He wasn't even given time to orient himself before something slammed into his back, sending what felt like a static shock through his entire body, causing his muscles to spasm and seize up. It felt like every cell in his body was being electrocuted by several thousand volts.

The feeling subsided, but Harry felt numb. He fell to his knees, and then onto his stomach. His face struck the ground with a harsh smack, though he didn't feel it. He couldn't feel much of anything.

A pair of shoes appeared in front of his face, his vision blurred as he was overcome with exhaustion, and then he was engulfed in darkness.

XoX

Daphne sat with Blaize and Tracey. They didn't know what was happening. After Professor McGonagall had found them, the three of them were separated from their friends and traveled to the Slytherin dorms in the basement. There they found just about every other Slytherin student, along with Professor Snape, standing around and looking unsure.

Their head of house hadn't told them why everyone had to stay in the dorms, only saying that something had happened and they were to remain there for their own safety. He did let them know that he'd inform

them about what happened once it was safe to do so. Draco had tried to strongarm Professor Snape into telling him what was happening, but not even the snot-nosed brat of the Malfoy family could wiggle that bit of information out of their head of house.

Professor Snape hadn't left the Slytherin common rooms. Daphne didn't know why, but he stayed in the common room with them, almost like he was attempting to prevent them from trying to sneak out, or maybe like he was trying to protect them. Even now she could see him standing in front of the entrance, arms crossed and face scowling.

"I wonder what crawled up his butt and died," Tracey murmured with a frown.

"Do you think there's been another death?" asked Blaise.

Daphne frowned as she tore her gaze away from Professor Snape. "That's possible. If we consider the way he's acting, there's a high chance that someone's been killed."

"I wonder if it was another student," Tracey contemplated.

The very fact that they were sitting there, speculating about how someone may have been killed, struck Daphne as wrong. It wasn't just how they were discussing whether or not someone had been killed. It was how discussions like this had become commonplace. It was how they were at Hogwarts, supposedly one of the safest locations in the entire world.

A noise alerted Daphne to something happening. It sounded like creaking. Seconds later, the crowd of students parted to reveal that Madam Pomfrey had entered the Slytherin common room.

"Severus," the woman began, "please bring everyone to the Great Hall."

Despite still wearing his patented sneer, Professor Snape nodded and turned to the students. "You heard her. We're going to the Great Hall. Everyone form an orderly line and follow me. Seventh years, make sure to keep all of the other students from getting out of order."

Daphne fell in line with the others as they filed out of the common room. Tracey was in front of her and Blaize was behind her. They walked up several flights of stairs and down numerous hallways, eventually reaching the large double doors of the Great Hall.

The Great Hall was already full of people. Because the Slytherin common room was further from the Great Hall than the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, it made sense that all she saw was a sea of blue and yellow. As they walked further in, Daphne held onto Tracey and Blaize's hands, to keep from being separated as they searched for their friends.

They found Susan, Hannah, Lisa, Luna, and Terry standing by Madam Amelia Bones. The sight of the DMLE's head startled Daphne, but she was a Greengrass. Her father's tutoring made it so that she would never display her surprise for longer than a second. Even now, those teachings, taught through many hours and a lot of pain, remained ingrained into her psyche.

"Madam Bones." She curtsied upon reaching the group. "I'm not sure if I should say it's a pleasure to see you right now."

A wry smile curled Madam Bones's lips. "Considering the situation, you would be right." She turned to Susan. "I'm going to speak with Severus Snape, so I'll leave you to your friends."

"Okay, Aunty."

As Madam Bones walked off, Tracey wandered up to the redhead, her gaze inquiring. "So, did your aunt tell you what's going on?"

Susan shook her head. "She only said that something serious has happened."

"I'm beginning to wonder if another student really has been killed," Lisa said, worrying her lower lip.

"It might even be a teacher," Terry added.

"But if someone was killed here, then it means whoever did it is somewhere in Hogwarts," Hannah said. "I know now that this school isn't

the safest place, but could there really be a rampaging murderer on the loose?"

"Our school doesn't have a very good track record," Tracey informed the blonde girl. "I mean, just look at all the crap that's happened to us up to now."

Daphne shook her head. "Many of the situations that happened to us were circumstantial. Professor Quirrell was possessed by Vo—the dark lord, and Ginny Weasley was possessed by a diary of the dark lord."

"So? Maybe one of the other students have been possessed by another item of the dark lord's," Tracey speculated.

"Unlikely," Daphne immediately rebutted her friend. "Even though the headmaster was forced to resign, he would have at least made sure that dark items couldn't pass through the barrier surrounding Hogwarts. While it might not be full proof, he'd have, at the very least, made it impossible for something dark enough to possess someone to be taken into Hogwarts."

"How are you so sure?" asked Lisa. "I don't want to down Head—I mean, Dumbledore, but there's no evidence to support you."

"Do you really think Dumbledore would let the same thing happen twice?" asked Daphne in return. "Look at what's happened so far this year. Until Dumbledore was forced to resign, all of the attacks happened outside of Hogwarts."

Blaize blinked in realization. "In other words, the attacks were committed outside of Hogwarts because the person who was doing the attacking couldn't attack while they were inside of the barrier."

"Exactly." Daphne nodded. "If this person could attack while inside of Hogwarts, they would've done so from the beginning, especially if Harry was their target. Instead, they had to attack him in a roundabout manner, using his insatiable curiosity to lure him into a trap, and then using the guise of a terrorist attack to try and kill him at Hogsmeade when their first attempt failed."

"But what about when those armored suits attacked Harry?" asked Neville. "If this person can't attack inside Hogwarts, then—"

"I never said they 'couldn't'," Daphne said. "If someone wanted to attack another person, they can. There's no magic barrier that can stop attacks from happening. However, I'm pretty sure Dumbledore placed a charm on the barrier that would alert him to any dark magic being used. That's why this person was so careful until now."

"You mean until Madam Umbridge became the headmistress?" Terry asked for clarification.

"Right," Daphne said. "I doubt Madam Umbridge was ever set up to become the true headmistress of Hogwarts. She probably has no idea how to properly use the wards. She might not even be able to use them."

"Which means that someone could feasibly use dark magic now and no one would know about it," Luna said. When everyone turned to look at her, she gave them a curious tilt of her head. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

"It's nothing..." Daphne mumbled before getting back on track. "Luna is right. If Umbridge can't activate or even use the wards surrounding Hogwarts, then she probably can't sense when dark magic is used."

"So when Dumbledore was taken out of the picture..." Tracey began.

"It left our school open to attacks from within," Blaise finished.

"This is bad," Terry said.

Before anything else could be said, the doors to the Great Hall opened and Professor McGonagall rushed in. She stood at the entrance, but not for long. Her gaze turned to Madam Bones. With her lips set in a thin line, she made a bee-line for the woman and began speaking frantically. Daphne wondered what they were talking about. She was getting a sinking feeling in her stomach. The feeling of her stomach dropping increased when Madam Bones returned to them.

"Could you all come with me please?" she asked.

No one said anything. Perhaps they, like Daphne, felt the sudden gravity to the situation. They followed Madam Bones without complaint. Professor McGonagall joined them, and as one, they went out of the Great Hall and into a small side door. After Madam Bones had cast several locking and silencing spells on the door, she turned around.

"Aunty?" Susan questioned with a worried expression.

"I don't know how to tell you this gently, so I'm just going to come out and say it." Madam Bones took a deep breath, held it, and then released it. For whatever reason, that action made Daphne more worried than before.

And then Madam Bones dropped the bombarda.

"Harry Potter has been kidnapped."

Daphne felt like someone had stabbed her in the stomach.

"W-what?" Susan asked, blinking rapidly as though trying to comprehend her aunt's words. Daphne couldn't even do that much.

Madam Bones sighed. "Professor McGonagall, if you'd please?"

Stepping forward, Professor McGonagall gave them all a sad look that verged on depressing. "We have eyewitness accounts from Mr. Longbottom and Ms. Astoria Greengrass who say that Ginerva Weasley placed an object in Mr. Potter's hand and they both disappeared."

An object? Disappeared? That didn't sound right. How could someone just disappear if an object was placed in their hands, unless...

"A portkey," Lisa murmured before Daphne could say anything.

"That is what we believe," Madam Bones said.

"But that shouldn't be possible!" Lisa burst. "Hogwarts has several enchantments surrounding it, and one of them is the deactivation of all portkeys. No one can use a portkey unless the headmaster allows it!"

"But Headmaster Dumbledore isn't here," Daphne murmured. Everyone turned to her. "The headmaster isn't Dumbledore. It's Umbridge. I bet you anything that Umbridge doesn't know how to properly activated the enchantments surrounding Hogwarts."

"Actually, Senior Undersecretary Umbridge is dead," Madam Bones admitted. Several gasps escaped the students. Even Daphne sucked in a breath. "We haven't told anyone, but since all of you are close to Harry, it's best that you know this now. We believe that Ginerva Weasley killed Umbridge in order to take down the enchantments."

It was true that without a headmaster or headmistress, the enchantments surrounding Hogwarts automatically went down. Daphne's understanding was that the protection around the school was linked to each headmaster. If the headmaster wasn't there, the protections couldn't be activated.

"What I don't understand is why Ginny would do something like this," Terry said.

"It must be because of the nargles," Luna told everyone.

"Come again?" asked a frowning Madam Bones.

"I noticed it when we came back from Christmas holidays," Luna said. "There were a lot of nargles surrounding Ginny. They were everywhere! I don't think I've ever seen so many nargles in one place. Even Harry's scar doesn't have that many."

"Nargles," Madam Bones mouthed as though unsure of how to take this.

Taking another look at Luna again, Daphne wondered if perhaps what Luna assumed were nargles was actually magic. No one had ever taken the girl's words seriously—no one except for Harry. He'd indulged the girl a number of times. When she mentioned nargles or some other make believe creature, he would ask her about them; what are they? How do they move? What do they do? Daphne had thought he was just humoring the girl, but now...

Could she be sensitive to magic?

There were cases of children who were sensitive to the flow and ebb of magic. Oftentimes they could sense magic through one of the five senses. Daphne had once read that Merlin had been able to "smell" magic, and that his sensitivity was such that he could determine exactly what spell had been cast, who had cast it, and how long ago it had been cast based on the magic's distinct scent. Maybe, just maybe, Luna saw magic as strange creatures that her mind made up.

"Do you think there might still be something wrong with her?" Susan asked.

"What do you mean?" asked Professor McGonagall with pursed lips.

"Last year, Ginny was possessed by a diary," Susan said. "Harry told us about how the diary of Vo-Voldemort had taken control of her and killed Hermione. Maybe... maybe being possessed caused something inside of her to snap."

"But why would it not become apparent until now?" asked Blaize. "If someone is going to break after something like that, it would have happened much sooner. People don't remain calm after stuff like this happens and then suddenly snap months down the road."

"My guess is it's because of the nargles," Luna said.

"What do you mean?" asked Daphne.

Tilting her head, Luna placed a finger to her lips as though she was thinking hard. "Well, during the beginning of this year, there were only a few nargles around Ginny. It wasn't until after Christmas break that she became infested with nargles."

While everyone else looked at her oddly, Daphne continued to question her. "What did these nargles look like? Was there anything unusual about them?"

"Hmm..." Luna frowned, her brow furrowing. "They did change color."

"Color?" Daphne blinked.

"Yes." Nodding, Luna said, "at the start of the year, all the nargles around her were red, but after Christmas holidays, the nargles became black."

"Black..."

If these "nargles" were, in fact, magic, then perhaps black meant Luna was seeing dark magic. Daphne wasn't Harry. She had no idea if she was even close to the mark. However, barring anything else to go on, she chose to believe that Luna could see magic, and that something was wrong with Ginny Weasley's magic.

That begged other questions, though. It couldn't have just been Ginny's magic that became corrupted. Could her mind have also degraded? It didn't sound right. If her mind had been destroyed, or if it became dark, it wouldn't have been such a slow process...

Daphne shook her head. *What happened to make Ginny do this way doesn't matter right now. Only one thing matters to me.*

"What are we gonna do?" Susan asked the question that Daphne wanted to ask. "How are we going to find Harry?"

A rather prominent frown appeared on Madam Bones's face. "You are not going to do anything. My aurors and I will find Harry."

"Unacceptable," Daphne said, surprising everyone there, including herself. That didn't mean she was going to stop. "There's no way I'm going to sit around, waiting on my thumbs while Harry is in danger."

"Daph is right," Tracey added.

"Harry's our friend," Terry agreed.

"Listen," Madam Bones started, "I know that Harry is important to all of you, but—"

"It's not just that," Blaize said, shocking Daphne. It wasn't in his nature to interrupt others. "You can't simply expect us to sit here and do nothing. Besides, can you really afford to not take all the help you can get?"

Professor McGonagall frowned at them. "Now, you lot. I understand that you're worried, but you're still just kids. This is too much for you."

"With all due respect, Professor, we've already been through more than most kids our age," Lisa said. "We've experienced more since coming to Hogwarts than even some adults. I don't think our age is a determining factor in whether or not we're qualified to help."

While Professor McGonagall huffed and made a thin line with her lips, Madam Bones turned to Susan. "I'm guessing you feel the same way?"

"Of course I do," Susan said, her doe-like brown eyes blazing with a determination that was becoming more commonplace in her.

The DMLE head sighed and gave her niece a weary smile. "I have raised a very stubborn niece."

"I'm only as stubborn as the one who raised me," Susan returned.

"Very well," Madam Bones said. "While I won't let any of you do something dangerous, I will allow you to help me locate Harry."

Daphne looked at the others in relief. They must have been feeling it, too, because they all wore the same smile. Even if it was just finding Harry, or helping find out where he'd been taken, at least they were doing something.

"Are you sure about this, Amelia?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"No." Madam Bones sighed. She looked at Daphne and the others, her smile both resigned and dry. "But I'm not sure I could stop these kids even if I tried. Besides, they're right. I can't afford to close any avenues that might help us locate Harry."

At those words, Professor McGonagall's shoulders slouched. "I see. I can't stop you, since I do not have the authority. However, understand that I will hold you responsible should any harm befall my students."

"Don't worry," Madam Bones said. "I'll make sure they never see danger."

"See to it that you do."

While everyone began chattering about how they were going to save Harry, Daphne looked up at the wall, narrowing her eyes as though she could see through it. She was startled when a hand grabbed hers. Blinking several times, she turned her head to see who had grabbed her. It was Susan.

"Don't worry," the redhead said. "We'll rescue Harry."

"Right." Daphne smiled and clutched Susan's hand. "Of course we will."

Welp. That's a wrap for this chapter. Harry's been kidnapped and his friends are going to rescue him. It's been difficult writing this. I wanted to accomplish several things with this chapter. First: I want to help reinforce that having perfect memory doesn't mean being perfect. Harry might remember everything he sees, but that doesn't mean he can't miss signs and clues. Second: I wanted to give the adults a chance to "prove themselves." In the canon Harry Potter series, adults are all but useless. They're like cannon fodder who's only purpose is to fail so Harry can move the plot. Third: I'm trying to decide what I want to do with Susan Bones. I believe I originally stated that she's going to be in Harry's harem, but I'm thinking about changing that. I've been playing around with Susan's character a lot, and I don't know if it's possible to put her with Harry because of her position and personal disposition. That said, nothing is set in stone yet. I just want you all to be aware that there is a chance that something will change at some point.

Anyway, I'd like to thank you all for reading. I hope you had fun!

Rituals of the New Moon

Chapter 21

Rituals of the New Moon

Harry woke up with a pained rasp. His chest felt like it had been repeatedly stabbed with a butcher knife. Every breath he took brought a sharp agony that made him want to curl into a ball. The jangling of chains made him flinch, even as the manacles attached to his wrists kept him from falling to the floor. The joints of his shoulders ached. A warm wetness trickled down his arms. A pair of manacles were digging into the skin of his wrists.

He looked at his surroundings with bleary eyes, but no matter how much he looked, nothing seemed to have changed. His prison looked the same as he remembered the last time he woke up. Dirty white carpet, disgusting white walls, a cracked white ceiling, all of which was covered in crimson runes. This place had more in common with a barren mansion room than a prison—not like it mattered. Wherever this place was, it had clearly been designed to keep him from leaving.

His eyes trailed across the runes covering the room. They were a meshwork of various runic languages. Just from the one side he had view of, Harry could see everything from Roman, Greek, Latin, Norse, and Egyptian runes. Someone had combined numerous languages into a single, massive, runic array. The person who had kidnapped him had unbelievable talent.

More jingling made his eyes trail up to the manacles that wrapped around his wrists. Beyond the blood dripping from underneath the iron shackles, Harry could see the chain that was keeping him aloft. The chain was just long enough that his feet touched the ground if he stood on his tiptoes, but it was too short for him to stand properly. This left him in a precarious position. His left shoulder had also been dislocated from his last attempt to escape. His magic hadn't healed it.

Harry didn't know where his wands were. Both his and his mother's wand had been gone the first time he'd woken up in this place. At that time, he had tried breaking out by smashing apart the manacles, but they were too strong. He'd also tried to pick the lock, but not only could he not conjure anything with which he could use as a lockpick, the manacles didn't have a keyhole. They were probably conjured creations.

A loud creaking echoed from behind him. Harry would've turned his head, but he didn't even have the strength for that anymore. Footsteps played an ominous tune on the carpet. *Thump-thump. Thump-thump.* They were precise, measured, and calm, the walk of someone who knew how to play with people's mind.

Seconds later, a person walked in front of him. Red hair. Green eyes. Freckles. She was shorter than him, but the sense of presence, the dark aura surrounding her, was unlike anything he'd felt.

"You..." Harry could barely speak. His throat was parched. "Tom..."

"Ginny" chuckled. "You've already figured out who I am. I'm not surprised. You really are intelligent. You actually remind me a lot of myself when I was your age."

"Ginny..."

"Still here, I'm afraid," Tom admitted with a shrug. "It's sad, but I can't get rid of her soul. Bodies are strange things. While the soul and the body are separated by the ethereal and physical plains, they are still connected by threads that cannot be undone without suffering consequences. If I killed off Ginny, this body would become useless." Tom cocked his—well, Ginny's—head to the side. "Of course, there are ways of fixing that, but it takes a long time, and it's not worth the effort, especially when I don't have any plans for this body."

Harry tried to follow Tom's line of thought, but the discomfort in his shoulders and pain in his arm distracted him. It made processing the words difficult. All he understood was that Tom had no designs on Ginny's body, and that Ginny was apparently still alive.

"You don't know how difficult it was for me to remain in this body," Tom

continued. "After you destroyed my diary, it took everything I had not to be destroyed along with it. Were it not for the fact that more than half of my soul had already been inside of her, I dare say I would've died. Not a pleasant prospect. No, not pleasant at all."

As he spoke, Tom played with Ginny's wand. Harry blinked. His focus shifted to the wand, which was being spun through Tom's—or rather, Ginny's—fingers.

"I had been weakened so much by what you did. My soul was waffling between slipping out of Ginny's body and destroying itself from the inside out. It took me months to stabilize my soul, and then it took me even longer to slowly subdue Ginny's mind without anyone realizing it. It didn't help that most of my magic had been consumed merely trying to keep myself inside of Ginny."

"Were you... responsible for what happened this year?" Harry asked, rasping.

Tom smiled. It looked creepy on Ginny's face. "Not everything. There were a good deal of fortunate coincidences that allowed me to accomplish what I have. I never would have been able to do anything so overt as kidnap you had Headmaster Dumbledore not been kicked out of Hogwarts."

So not everything that had happened was caused by Tom Riddle. It sounded like all the events outside of Hogwarts, such as Peter Pettigrew's death and whatever Lucius Malfoy was doing were separate issues. That sucked. Still, at least he now had a clearer idea of what was happening, though it wouldn't do him any good now.

"And why did you kidnap me?" asked Harry.

"Many reasons," Tom replied. "Revenge, hatred... if I had to choose one, I'd say the biggest reason is because I want your body."

It took Harry a second to realize what Tom meant. "You want to use this body as your own?"

"That's right." Lips peeling back to reveal shiny white teeth, Tom grinned

with Ginny's face. "Out of all the people I've met, you have the most ideal body. Your body is strong and your magic powerful. What's more, you're the Boy-Who-Lived. You have everything that I want, so I'm going to take it from you."

Tom paced in front of him. Harry could do nothing but track the man housing himself inside of Ginny with his eyes.

"But don't worry. I'll be sure to take great care of your body. Yes, with your body, I'll become the most powerful wizard in the entire world. I'll become even more feared than when I was Lord Voldemort." Tom stopped pacing, spun to face him, and pointed Ginny's wand at him. "Sadly, you won't be around to witness my triumph. *Crucio!*"

From that moment on, Harry's life was nothing but excruciating pain.

XoX

An announcement had been made immediately after Madam Bones had spoken with Daphne and the others: The headmistress and DADA professor were dead, and Harry Potter had been kidnapped. It was not shocking that panic had ensued. The students had never been so freaked out before. It showed on their faces, it was displayed in their actions. No one even wanted to leave their dorms anymore.

The following days had been hard on Daphne. Aside from being forced to remain in the Slytherin den, Madam Bones had yet to contact them again, so she had been forced to rely on the Daily Prophet for information from outside.

It seemed the world at large knew about what had happened to Senior Undersecretary Umbridge, Professor Antus, and Harry Potter. The Daily Prophet had spent its last two newspapers bashing the Ministry of Magic for its inability to properly deal with this situation. Perhaps in a not so unusual turn of events, it had also run roughshod over Minister Fudge for forcing Dumbledore to resign. There had even been several front page articles calling for Dumbledore's return.

Classes were no longer held in the classrooms. With no headmaster in place to activate the wards, Madam Bones had instituted a new policy

stating that classrooms would be held in the house common rooms. Instead of students traveling to and from classrooms, teachers traveled to and from the common rooms. They taught classes as best they could. That said, it wasn't an efficient method. There was simply no way teachers could rush to each common room, teach for an hour, and then rush to the next common room without suffering some kind of consequence.

Daphne had already noticed the effect this new policy had on her head of house. Professor Snape had not only been more irritable, refusing to speak with even his Slytherins, but he also had bags under his eyes and walked with a slump. Since the head of house was also required to be present until they needed to begin lessons in another common room, she would see him standing around the entrance, or sitting in front of the fireplace, his shoulders slouched and his eyes drooping. The other teachers were much the same.

It was hard to believe that only two days had passed. To Daphne, it seemed like much longer. The days moved by at a snail's pace as she waited for word from Madam Bones that they had found Harry. Yet no word had come, and since she couldn't see Susan because they were in different houses, they couldn't communicate either.

I wonder if that was the whole point.

Sitting on the couch in front of the fireplace, Daphne entertained dark thoughts. She didn't want to assume it, but maybe all this, separating them into their houses, had been done to keep her and the others from trying to find Harry on their own. If so, it meant she had clearly underestimated Madam Bones's cunning.

"Man... I am so bored," Tracey muttered.

Daphne scowled. She loved Tracey. Truly. But, sometimes, her friend had a really bad habit of annoying her. While she was worrying sick about Harry, Tracey seemed more concerned with how bored she was.

Daphne knew that she was being hard on her friend; she didn't doubt that Tracey was also worried. Still, Tracey's carefree attitude in this situation bothered her. How could she be so calm when their friend had been

kidnapped?

"There hasn't been much going on, has there?" Blaize said, seemingly in agreement.

"What do you think the others are doing?"

Blaize shrugged. "Probably the same thing we are."

She, Tracey, and Blaize were sitting on the couch. A fire blazed in front of them. They weren't the only people present. Numerous students of every year were inside of the common room, clumped together in groups as they talked. Perhaps not surprisingly, Draco Malfoy was the loudest. She could hear him laughing at something with his friends.

"This sucks," Tracey said.

"Agreed," Blaize said.

Unable to concentrate on anything, Daphne tried to listen in on Malfoy's conversation. She normally would never deign to taint her ears with his filthy voice. However, she didn't know what else to do, and perhaps she could learn something. There was a chance that the plan to kidnap Harry had been concocted by Malfoy's father.

"I bet you anything Pothead is dead already," Malfoy was saying. "I certainly wouldn't mind if he was gone. Would save me a lot of trouble."

"Who do you think kidnapped him anyway?" asked Nott.

"Don't know," Malfoy admitted. "It could have been one of the dark lord's former death eaters. If it was, it'd certainly serve him right. That fool's been trying to butt heads with Father ever since he showed his stupid scar covered face."

Daphne gritted her teeth as she listened to Malfoy. The longer he spoke, the more she wanted to show him what kind of spells her father had taught her.

"It's too bad the dark lord isn't here to see this," Pansy Parkinson said,

her pug-like nose wrinkling as she laughed.

"Isn't it? I bet he'd get a hoot out of knowing that Pothead has been kidnapped. He might even be willing to give the person who did it a reward for their service."

As Malfoy and his thugs laughed, Daphne stood up. Blaize and Tracey looked at her, then at each other, and then they also stood up. They followed her as she wandered over to the stairs. Her plan was to leave the room so she wouldn't have to listen to Malfoy's drivel.

"Where are you going, Greengrass?" Malfoy called out, stopping her plan in its tracks.

"I thought that would be obvious, Malfoy," Daphne said in a cold voice as she turned her head. She gave the Malfoy heir a baleful stare. "I've no intention to listen to you spew your arrogant shite all over the floor."

Malfoy scowled, but the expression soon turned into a grin. "Hmm... I see. You're upset that your friend has been kidnapped. I don't see why. He was a stain on your family, always hanging around. Now that Pothead is gone, the Greengrasses can become a proper pureblood family again."

"The only improper pureblood family are yours and those like yours," Blaize said.

"I wasn't talking to you, Twink," Malfoy snapped. "I was speaking to Daphne."

"It wouldn't matter if you were talking to me or not," Blaize said, ignoring the insult with ease. "Her answer would have been the same as mine. Your family and those like it are the only traitors here."

"That's right," Tracey added, "So shut the frack up, Blondie."

"I see you're as uncultured as ever," Malfoy sniffed.

"Draco," Pansy crooned. Daphne cringed at her voice. "I'm tired of dealing with these slags. Let's just ignore them."

Tracey took a step forward. "Oh, you did not just call me and my friends slags."

Pansy wrinkled her pug-like nose. "Of course I did. That's what you are. You're all Harry's slags."

"Then I guess that would make you Malfoy's slag," Blaize said. "How much does he pay you anyway? Can other people hire you?"

Pansy's face turned purple. The way her skin wrinkled as though she was a rotten fruit amused Daphne.

"How dare you," she hissed. "I'll have you know that Draco and I are betrothed! It's only natural for two such people to be close, unlike you and yours."

"I'd recommend you tossers watch what you say," Malfoy added. As if to emphasize his point, Crabbe and Goyle stepped forward and cracked their knuckles.

Daphne slowly palmed her wand, sweat trickling down her scalp. If a fight broke out, she and her friends would surely win. They'd been training with Harry for about two years now. She was already plotting out how they'd be victorious. She'd take down Malfoy first. Without their head, the body would fall shortly after. Blaize and Tracey could easily dispose of Crabbe and Goyle before they got too close, and Pansy wouldn't be much of a problem. The only two issues that she could see were Theodore Nott and Charline Bishwick.

The one who worried Daphne the most was Charline. Not much was known about her. She was a year ahead of them, and all of her grades were supposedly mid-ranked. She was stuck solidly in the middle.

Going by her grades, there was nothing to worry about, but Daphne felt uneasy around her. The biggest issue she had was on how little knowledge was available about the girl. Charline was practically a ghost. Outside of her grades, nothing was known about her, not her family, not her history... it was as if she'd just appeared on day. There was also...

She's smiling at me.

Charline's smile was calm, collected. It was the kind of smile that someone gave to people when they didn't have a single care. However, beneath that smile, Daphne couldn't help but feel like there was something lurking there, a hidden horror, an unknown monster. She didn't want to admit it, but that smile scared her. It scared her almost as much as her father's.

Before the situation could degrade any further, Professor Snape wandered into the common room. He took one look at the gathered crowd. Then he sneered.

"What are all of you doing?" he asked, though he didn't give anyone time to respond. "We've been summoned to the Great Hall for breakfast. There's going to be an important announcement, so I suggest you all follow me."

Breakfast, lunch, and dinner were the only times when all four houses gathered. They were lead their by their head of houses. This was the only time that Daphne could speak with the others—not that they'd been able to take advantage of this fact. What they wanted to talk about was too sensitive to risk others overhearing it, and none of them had Harry's knack for creating silencing barriers.

This meant they could only speak in code.

"Stori." Daphne smiled as she greeted her little sister. "How is everything with the Gryffindors?"

They had chosen to sit at the Ravenclaw table that day; she, Astoria, Luna, Neville, and Terry sat on one side. Blaize, Hannah, Lisa, Tracey, and Susan sat on the other.

"Well, everyone seems to be pretty frightened," Astoria said as she spooned some oatmeal onto her plate. "Not that I blame them, mind. I mean, Harry Potter did get kidnapped right in front of most of them. I feel sorriest for the Weasley twins. They're still in shock."

Astoria spent almost as much time with Fred and George Weasley as she did Luna. Daphne wasn't sure how she felt about that, but she supposed so long as she didn't get into trouble, it would be okay.

Besides, it made her sister happy.

"Has anyone else been acting unusual?" Daphne asked.

Astoria shook her head. "Not that I've seen."

Daphne nodded and looked at Neville, who shook his head. "I haven't noticed anything either."

She sighed. "Same as yesterday, then."

"I actually have some news that might cheer you up," Susan spoke up. "Aunty sent me a letter yesterday saying that she has some good news. She wouldn't tell me what, but her letter said there was going to be an announcement this morning."

"An announcement?" Lisa blinked. "She didn't say what?"

Susan shook her head.

"Well, that sucks." Tracey sighed. "It means we have to learn what's going on beside everyone else."

"If it was something that couldn't wait, I'm sure Madam Bones would have told us," Terry said. "Don't be so impatient."

"I'm not impatient," Tracey barked. "I just want to know before everyone else."

"That's the same thing as being impatient, idiot."

"Oh, shut up!"

Daphne tuned out Terry and Tracey as they argued. She tried to think about what announcement Madam Bones would be making, but she couldn't think of what might be important enough to tell everybody about. It could be anything. Even so, she didn't think it was about Harry—she was sure that Madam Bones would have told them before everyone else—so whatever the DMLE head had to say didn't mean much to her.

As if contradicting her thoughts, the door opened and in walked two people. One of them was Madam Bones. The other was...

"Merlin's scraggly scrotum!" Tracey exclaimed. "It's Dumbledore!"

Daphne couldn't even reprimand Tracey for her language; she was shocked as well. It was Dumbledore. At the same time...

"What is he wearing?" Neville asked the question that everyone else wanted to know.

Dumbledore was wearing the most unusual outfit she had ever seen. White swim trunks went above his knees, and he wore a button up T-shirt with motifs of palm trees and coconuts. He also a pair of sunglasses covering his eyes. His beard had been braided. Sitting atop his head was a large straw hat. He also had a martini in his hand.

"Did I just step into an alternate reality?" asked Terry.

"I wouldn't be surprised if that's what happened," Hannah murmured.

Most everyone was silent as Dumbledore walked up to the front next to an exhausted Madam Bones. He reached the podium, turned around, and spoke in a voice that reached all corners of the room. "Students of Hogwarts! Forgive me for not being dressed for the occasion. I had been enjoying a vacation in Guam."

V-vacation in Guam? Daphne felt her hand twitch. Was this some kind of joke?

"Well, that explains why it took several days to get him back," Tracey said at last.

Terry nodded. "Indeed."

They're just accepting it?!

"I've heard about what happened," Dumbledore continued. "I do not believe there is any need to reiterate this point. Let me assure you all that I will do everything in my power to ensure that this school no longer has

to deal with the hardships it's had. I will be working with the aurors to not only increase the security surrounding Hogwarts, but I'll also do everything within my power to locate Harry Potter."

Despite his ridiculous clothing, Daphne couldn't help but feel relieved by Dumbledore's words. She also hoped this would mean that they, Dumbledore and Madam Bones, would speak with her and her friends. She wanted to help find Harry, and she was sure that her friends felt the same way.

"The wards have been restored," Dumbledore kept talking. "So all of you will be attending your classes as normal. If you see anything suspicious, do not hesitate to report it to either a professor or one of the portraits. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need change back into my robes. Please continue eating."

Dumbledore—no, Headmaster Dumbledore—left after that, leaving the students to their conversation, which was now about the headmaster. Daphne listened to them for a moment. She stopped, however, because she soon became slightly disgusted about how everyone was now talking about how "Dumbledore would surely help them." These people had been scorning him before, but now they were praising him.

It's just like Harry said. Most of these people are nothing more than sheep.

"Did anyone else find that weird?" asked Tracey. Everyone shook their head. "Okay. Glad it's not just me."

Breakfast continued, except now everyone was talking about the headmaster's return. Daphne focused on her meal. While she was curious about Headmaster Dumbledore coming back and what that could potentially mean for her, she didn't have any information to go off of yet, so she wasn't about to start speculating.

When breakfast was nearing its end, Madam Bones came up to their group and said, "Susan, I'd like you and your friends to come with me to the headmaster's office, please."

Susan looked up. Then she looked at everyone else. Daphne also

studied her friends, who were all wearing similar expressions. As a group, everyone nodded.

Susan turned back to her aunt. "Okay."

"Great," Madam Bones said. "Please follow me."

Since everyone was already done eating, they stood up and followed Madam Bones out of the Great Hall. As they walked, the group kept close together and spoke.

"What do you think this is about?" asked Hannah.

"If I had to guess, I would say it's about Harry," Blaize said.

Neville nodded. "I can't see any other reason they'd ask all of us to the headmaster's office."

"Me neither," Tracey added.

Daphne didn't speak. They arrived at the headmaster's office soon, and all of them had the pleasure of watching Madam Bones prepare to knock on the door—

"Come in, Amelia."

—Only to be interrupted.

"Harry told me about this," Tracey said with a snicker.

They filed into the room, which shut behind them. Daphne looked around. The headmaster's office had been restored to its former glory. She'd only been in this place once when Madam Umbridge had been headmistress. She didn't think she'd ever be so glad to see the room returned to its original quirkiness.

Headmaster Dumbledore was already sitting behind his desk, and he was no longer wearing that gaudy outfit. Dressed back in his wizarding robes, he looked more like a headmaster. Daphne was glad. His previous outfit had been... well, to call it shocking may have been understating the

matter.

There was someone else beside him. She was a mousy woman with scraggly hair and large glasses that reminded Daphne of enormous pucks. Her wardrobe, an odd mixture of wizarding robes that appeared to have been made from patches and a quilted scarf, made her look even more like an oddball.

"Welcome, everyone," Headmaster Dumbledore said. "I'm glad to see you could all make it. Now, as we are pressed for time, please allow me to introduce Professor Trelawny. I'm sure some of you have her as your teacher. She's going to be helping us locate Harry."

"She is?" Tracey asked, her face wrinkling with skepticism. "No offense, Headmaster, but have you gone—kyaaa!" Tracey shrieked and spun around, holding a hand to her backside. "All right! Which one of you pinched my butt?"

"That would be me." Astoria raised her hand.

"Why would you do that?" Tracey asked, aghast.

Astoria shrugged. "Because if I hadn't, Daphne and Susan would have elbowed you. I figured this was the lesser of two evils."

Tracey grimaced, but she didn't say anything—probably because she realized that Astoria was right.

"I'd like to ask the question that I'm sure Tracey was going to ask," Neville said. "How is she going to help us find Harry?"

Professor Trelawny sniffed at them. "My dear children, I'll have you know that I am a true seer. My talents are born from a long and noble ancestry. In fact, many in my family were seers, and I am the first one to come in three generations."

"I know of a spell that we can use to divine Harry's location," Professor Dumbledore said. "Even if he is located behind a Fidelius Charm, the spell is so powerful that it cannot be blocked. Sadly, we can only use this spell once every two years, due to how dangerous it can be."

"If you've asked for us, I assume that means you have some need for our aid?" Daphne said.

Headmaster Dumbledore nodded. "Very astute, Ms. Greengrass. Yes, I need seven of you to help me with this spell. You see, this spell is unique in that, in order for it to work, it requires exactly seven people who are close to Harry."

Including Daphne, Harry Potter had exactly ten friends that he could rely on. Three of them would be excluded.

"Daphne should definitely be one of them," Tracey said. "Everyone knows that she loves Harry—ouch!"

"Please refrain from speaking," Daphne said as she lowered her hand, which she had used to karate chop Tracey's head.

"I'd also like to take part in this," Susan said.

"That's two. We need five more," Dumbledore said.

"I'll do it." Neville stepped forward.

Blaize also took a step forward. "So will I."

"I'd like to help out, if I can," Lisa said, stepping up with the others.

Luna looked at everyone, and then took her own step forward. "I think you all could use my experience with nargles to help find Harry."

"Hmph! If you guys are doing this, I'm not gonna stand back and do nothing," Tracey said, puffing up her chest.

Terry sighed. "I'll make sure Tracey doesn't muck up the spell."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"Excellent!" Headmaster Dumbledore clapped his hands. "We have seven people who can help me perform the spell. It's good to see that Harry has such great friends. Now, the spell takes a good deal of time to

prepare, so we'll meet on the seventh day of this month, at thirteen hundred hours, on the night of the new moon. Your head of houses will let you know when the spell is ready."

Daphne frowned. It was April 2nd, which meant they would have to wait five days for the spell to be ready. She didn't want to wait that long, but it didn't look like they had a choice. This spell must have been a complex one. Few spells required so many magical numbers and ritualistic symbols to cast.

I hate waiting, she lamented to herself.

XoX

Harry Potter stared at nothing. His body had long since lost its strength. Hanging limply within the shackles that bound him, he could no longer feel the blood dripping down his arms, or the liquid staining his robes. All he could do was dangle there like a piece of meat being displayed in front of a butcher store.

Time had lost its meaning; he no longer knew how much of it had passed. Hours? Days? Weeks? Years? He couldn't tell anymore. The numerous torture sessions he'd undergone had left him incapable of thinking about anything outside of survival. His internal clock had been busted after spending who knew how many hours under Voldemort's *crucio*.

The first few sessions had been the worst. Voldemort would come in and hit him with a *crucio* spell until he passed out, his mind overloaded with agony. Harry eventually became accustomed to the pain. However, once that happened, Voldemort decided to up the ante. He'd then begun attacking Harry with legilimency and *crucio*.

Harry quickly learned that Voldemort was a master legilimens. His attacks could be brutal and powerful, but they could also be subtle and cunning, strong yet flexible. Sometimes the mind attacks were like a sledgehammer being slammed against his mind. Other times it was like a rapier, slowly cutting away at his sanity piece by piece. The attacks were so varied that Harry never knew what kind of attack was coming his way until after it already happened.

He'd done his best to defend himself, of course, but Harry had soon realized that his skills, enviable though they may have been, were nothing compared to Voldemort's. Again and again Voldemort would rape his mind. The dark lord would extract his memories and torture him by replacing those memories with nightmares.

What made it worse was that Voldemort had discovered Harry's two greatest secrets: his eidetic memory, and his friendship with Lisa. The only silver lining was that he had yet to extract Lisa's location from him. Harry had zealously protected that information. It didn't matter if Voldemort discovered everything else. He would not let this man have that.

"You really are quite resilient," Voldemort complemented Harry after another torture session. "Everyone else I've done this to broke within the first day, but you've lasted for four. That mind of yours really is something."

Harry said nothing. He probably could have made a retort, if he wanted to, but that would have taken energy. It was better to save his energy. He would need it if he wanted to escape from this place.

"Nothing to say? That's too bad," Voldemort said in Ginny's voice. "And here I was hoping we could have a pleasant conversation. You're quite rude, you know."

He knew what Voldemort was trying to do. By talking while Harry was weak, he was hoping to make Harry reply as a means of testing how far along Harry's mind had broken. If Harry replied, it meant he was weakening because he didn't have the mental strength to keep his mouth shut.

And so Harry said nothing.

Voldemort sighed.

"I see you are still being stubborn. Very well." Rolling Ginny's wand between his fingers, Voldemort grinned. "Shall we begin again?"

As Voldemort cast a *crucio* while simultaneously attacking his mind with

legitimacy, Harry Potter's world became nothing but an endless cycle of pain. His screams of agony echoed within the small room.

XoX

Five days felt more like five years to Daphne. During that time, she had been unable to concentrate on anything, not her school work, not her friends, she barely even slept or ate. Almost all of her thoughts were consumed with worry for Harry.

Her friends were in the same boat. Most of them didn't do anything. When they should have been studying, instead they were idling around, doing nothing. When they should have been listening to their teachers, they were doing anything but. It had become so bad that even Professor Snape had asked her what was wrong.

Susan had also been hit particularly hard, but that might have been due to the personal conflict she was going to. Daphne wanted Susan to become one of Harry's wives. She had spoken with the girl numerous times before, and, for the past one and a half years, Susan had been teetering between what she wanted out of her relationship with Harry. That compiled with his kidnapping had probably left her more haggard than their other friends.

Fortunately, five days did eventually pass. Even so, that day was quite possibly the worst out of all them.

She and her friends were informed after breakfast that they would be performing the ritual. Professor McGonagall had given them a slip of parchment, which told them to meet in the central tower at midnight. The passcode to get through the door was "heir."

Sitting in Charms class, Daphne could do nothing but tap her foot against the floor and wonder how much longer she'd have to wait. They were supposed to be doing revisions on the disarming charm. However, Daphne couldn't even think straight, much less work on revisions.

"Hey, Daph." Tracey leaned over to whisper in her ear. "I know you're worried about Harry, but you really should focus."

"I don't want to hear that from you," Daphne snapped before grimacing. "Sorry. I don't mean to be rude. I'm just—"

"You're just worried about Harry," Tracey finished. "I know. Everyone knows. You really love him, don't you?"

Daphne's right ring finger twitched. "I... Yes, I do. He means a lot to me."

Tracey nodded. "He means a lot to everyone, but I can tell that he holds a special place in your heart. I'm kinda surprised. Never thought I'd see the day you would fawn over a boy."

"I'm not fawning over anyone." Daphne scowled, and then she sighed. "It's not fawning. Harry has done a lot for me these past three years. It's thanks to him that Astoria and I are as happy as we are now. Even if I hadn't fallen in love with him, I'd want to repay him for everything he's done to help us."

"Does Harry know you love him?" Tracey asked.

"He definitely knows I like him," Daphne replied neutrally. "He also knows that I would like him to consider marrying me in the future... but I don't know if he realizes that I love him. I'm sure part of him just thinks I want to marry him so Astoria and I can get out from under our father's thumb."

Harry was a boy who believed in practicality and acting in a manner that was based on logic instead of emotion. Whether it was befriending powerful pureblood families or creating places like the All-House Common Room, everything Harry had done served his own purpose in some ways. Always practical. Always logical. Daphne was actually surprised that he had been placed in Gryffindor. His ambitions and actions were clearly those of a Slytherin.

Since Harry believed in being practical, some part of him likely also believed that others acted in the same manner, especially those who were placed in Slytherin. There was no doubt that he thought Daphne wanted to marry him for the sake of hers and her sister's safety. He would not be incorrect in thinking that way either.

At the same time, she wasn't just doing this for that reason. She wanted

to get away from her father, true, but she also wanted to be with Harry. If she had to become someone's mistress, then she wanted it to be with someone she loved.

"Yeah," Tracey agreed. "Harry's not really the kind of guy who thinks about romance and stuff, huh? A marriage to him would probably mean something like a political alliance between families or whatever."

"Most likely." Daphne smiled. "He's also a boy. You know that girls mature faster than boys."

Tracey nodded. "True that."

"I'm right here, you know," Blaize said with a small sigh. Neither of them paid attention to him, though.

Classes eventually came to an end. Daphne and the others went to their common rooms, but that did not bring an end to her anxiety. Indeed, the closer the chosen time came, the faster her heart seemed to beat.

The door to her dorm suddenly opened and Professor Snape walked in. Since he was the head of house, it made sense that he could enter the girl's dorm. He looked at her and Tracey. Both of them were sitting on her bed. Then he gestured to them.

"Follow me," he said.

She and Tracey looked at each other before standing up, slipping on their shoes, and following Professor Snape out of the girl's dorm.

Blaize was waiting outside of the dorm entrance. He nodded at them as they walked into the common room, and then filed in line.

Professor Snape exited the common room and lead them through Hogwarts. Daphne didn't even bother memorizing the route they had taken—not that she could. She followed Professor Snape as Tracey spoke to Blaize.

"What kind of spell do you think they're going to cast?" she asked.

"Who knows. It'll probably be some kind of ritual magic. That's the only reason they would require so much preparation time."

"I guess. Hey, do you know any rituals?"

"I know of rituals, but I can say that I know any."

Ritual magic was an offshoot branch of ancient runes. It used a combination of arithmancy, runes, and astronomy to accomplish. Certain rituals could only be performed during certain times of the day, or under specific seasons when certain star formations were visible. They required specific arithmetic numbers that would enhance the runic arrays power. Daphne didn't know much about rituals, but she knew that the one they were going to perform must be strong. Not only was it being done during a new moon, it also required seven people to perform it.

The ritual was being performed in the central tower, the tallest of the towers. Daphne and Blaize hiked up the tower in silence. Tracey groaned the longer they climbed.

"How many freaking stairs does this thing have?" she griped.

"Quiet, Ms. Davis," Professor Snape said.

Tracey fell silent.

The tallest tower was actually the astronomy tower. The top was normally where Professor Sinistra slept. However, at that moment, all of her personal effects had been removed. The room, barren of any sort of decoration or furniture, now played host to a massive runic array the likes of which Daphne had never seen. It was painted along the walls, floor, and ceiling, lines and symbols that she knew not. They swirled around the room like a mosaic.

Headmaster Dumbledore was already there. He looked a bit pale as the moonlight played off his face. Standing beside him were Neville, Astoria, Lisa, Terry, Hannah, Susan, and Luna, along with their head of houses. Professor Trelawny was also present. She stood away from the others, looking as though she was preparing herself for an arduous task. Daphne had the feeling she was trying to look important.

"Ah." Headmaster Dumbledore's eyes lit up when they arrived. "It is good that you are here. We must begin the final preparation for the ritual immediately."

As Daphne, Tracey, and Blaise walked over to their friends, Professor McGonagall frowned at the headmaster. "Perhaps it's time you tell us how this ritual is going to work."

"Of course," Dumbledore replied easily. "This is a magic based divination ritual. The seven students who will take part are there to act as anchors to Mr. Potter. Their love, respect, and friendship with Harry will be like threads that will allow Professor Trelawny to divine Mr. Potter's location."

Ah.

Now Daphne understood why they needed seven to perform the ritual. Seven was one of the most powerful magical numbers. By having seven of Harry's friends there to perform it, the power of the "threads" that tied them to Harry would be that much stronger.

Furthermore, new moons were seen as a symbolic point of attention and a symbol for new beginnings. New moons also represent the beginning of a new cycle. Magically speaking, it was the time when people rested to increase their power, meaning that in a ritual, the new moon was magically more powerful than a full moon.

Dumbledore continued his explanation. "While Harry's friends act as the threads that tie the ritual to him, you four, along with myself, shall provide the power necessary to activate the ritual. Meanwhile, Trelawny will become the focal point for the ritual."

That means there will be thirteen people in total.

Like seven, thirteen was a powerful number in magic based rituals and arithmancy. This ritual would eventually combine two magically powerful numbers together. Actually, if Daphne thought about it further, the other people taking part made six. Headmaster Dumbledore and Professors Flitwick, McGonagall, Sprout, Snape, and Trelawny. Six was divisible by three, which meant this ritual used the three most powerful numbers in magic four times.

This spell must take a frightening amount of power.

"Okay." Headmaster Dumbledore clapped his hands. "Everyone, please get into position. Severus, Minerva, Sprout, Flitwick, please stand in the circles that represent power. Trelawny stand in the middle. Everyone else, find a circle and stand in it, please."

All of the professors moved into a specific circle with a runic symbol that Daphne didn't recognise. That left seven empty circles, which she and her friends stepped into. Professor Trelawny moved into the middle and began muttering.

"Ah, yes. I can feel it. Tonight I shall be forced to reveal my true power. Many moons have passed since I have needed to bring out my full power. The time is nigh! We'll unlock the mysteries of the future!"

Professor McGonagall pinched the bridge of her nose as though disgusted by Professor Trelawny's act. Meanwhile, Headmaster Dumbledore smiled as he began to explain the next step. "All right. While the professors and I are channeling magic into the ritual, I want you seven to close your eyes and think of Mr. Potter. Do not think of anything else. Visualize Mr. Potter in your mind. Keep that image locked in place. This is important. If you're not thinking solely of Harry, the ritual won't work."

Terry and Trace gulped, but they were the only ones who appeared nervous. Neville's face had hardened and become stone, Blaize simply took several calming breaths, and Luna was staring at the sky with her head tilted. Daphne didn't even want to know what was going on through that girl's mind.

What if the ritual doesn't work?

The thought entered her mind before she could stop it. As much as she hated entertaining the idea, she knew that with so many people involved, there was a high chance of failure. Rituals were more difficult when more people were added. This was because they required people's minds to be in sync, but that was hard when there were so many people with different thoughts and mindsets.

What if I fail?

Her greatest fear was not just the ritual not working, but that she would somehow cause it to mess up. Harry meant a lot to her. In fact, the only person more important to her than Harry was Astoria. She didn't think she could bear the thought of being why this ritual failed to work.

"Okay, everyone," Headmaster Dumbledore said, snapping Daphne out of her anxiety. "We're now beginning the ritual."

Daphne shunted aside her fears, put away her doubts, and locked her worries in the furthest recesses of her mind. There was no time for that. She needed to focus.

Closing her eyes and clasping her hands together, Daphne emptied her mind. When it was suitably void, she imagined Harry, pictured his vivid green eyes and messy black hair, envisioned the scar on his forehead. She produced images of him during their times together, recalling all the little quirks that she remembered: how ridiculous he looked when he tried to wear a business suit, how he would sometimes roll his wand between his fingers when he was thinking, the way his brows would furrow, or how his eyes would light up while explaining magic to them. Daphne filled her mind with images of him, so many that she thought her heart would burst.

And that was when something happened.

It felt like something was tugging her mind. The images she conjured blurred and moved away from her, as though they were being pulled out of her head.

Daphne opened her eyes, not sure what she would find. The entire room was lit in a blood red glow. The runic array had magic visibly flowing through it, reminding her of a stream. All of the energy was flowing from the circles they stood in, following the lines, lighting up the rune symbols, and then traveling toward Professor Trelawny.

Professor Trelawny, whose eyes no longer showed her pupils. They were pure white. Glowing with magic as though her eyes had become lumos spells, the divination professor no longer looked like a joke. Her mouth opened, and a voice that sounded like Professor Trelawny but not at the

same time spoke.

"The one with the power to defeat the dark lord shall be found within the ancestral home of that who can only be defeated by him. There, he shall be rescued by the ones who love him most. The one with the power to defeat the dark lord shall be found within the dark lord's ancestral home."

After she finished speaking, the glowing runes died out, and Professor Trelawny slumped to the ground like a marionette without strings. The other professors all fell to their knees. They heaved for breath as though exhausted. Even Headmaster Dumbledore was slumped over like he'd run two-hundred kilometers without rest.

"So, like, does anyone have any idea what Professor Trelawny meant?" asked Tracey.

"She said that the one with the power to defeat the dark lord will be found in the dark lord's ancestral home," Terry said. "She was clearly talking about Harry."

"Thank you for that, Boot, but that's not what I meant," Tracey snapped.

"The ancestral home is probably talking about the dark lord's birthplace," Lisa said. "Or perhaps the birthplace of his family."

"Very astute, Ms. Turpin," Headmaster Dumbledore said. "This divination was indeed talking about the birthplace of the dark lord's family."

"Do you know where that is, Headmaster?" asked Neville.

"I know of at least two potential places," the headmaster admitted. "One of them I cannot remember the exact location of, though I know what town it is in. It's likely under fidelius. I doubt we'll find Mr. Potter in that one."

"Where's the other one?" asked Daphne.

Headmaster Dumbledore gave Daphne a grim smile. "It is the place where Salazar Slytherin was born, and it is there that I believe we will find Mr. Potter."

Ties that Bind is reaching its conclusion. I've left a lot of loose ends in this story, which I'm hoping to expand into later plots and subplots in later books. With luck, it will help spice up the next book. For those who stuck with me, I hope you have enjoyed the story. There are three more chapters before this book ends. Thank you all for reading it.

P.S. If you would like to learn about what I am writing, then you guys are all free to follow me on twitter. My twitter account is BrandonBVarnell.

The Rescue

Chapter 22

The Rescue

"Absolutely not!" Madam Amelia Bones all but shouted.

Daphne, Susan, Blaize, Neville, Hannah, Lisa, Tracey, Terry, Luna, and Astoria were standing in the headmaster's office. They were not taking place in the heated discussion, however. The ones arguing currently were Madam Bones and Headmaster Dumbledore, though it looked like the Heads of Houses were on Madam Bones's side. If nothing else, they were standing behind her and not the headmaster.

"Amelia—" Dumbledore tried.

"Do not 'Amelia' me, Headmaster," Madam Bones snapped. "You are asking me to take a bunch of school children with me on a dangerous rescue mission. That's the height of lunacy. I'll not be party to it."

"I do not want them to be placed in such danger anymore than you do," Headmaster Dumbledore replied, his voice mild. "However, Professor Trelawny's words were 'he shall be rescued by the ones who love him most'. This means they are the key to rescuing Mr. Potter. If they do not take part in this mission, then the chances of your success drop to about zero."

"You're saying we'll fail?" Madam Bones curled her lips in distaste. "You already know that I do not put any stock in prophecies and such, Dumbledore."

The headmaster spread his arms. "And yet, you are going to rescue Mr. Potter based on the information given in one of those divinations."

"Divining someone's location is one thing. Telling us that we can only succeed if a group of children come with us is another."

There were two points of contention to this back and forth. Madam Bones had objected to Daphne and the others going with them from the moment Headmaster Dumbledore had suggested it. Her stance was that she and the others were too young to take part in a mission like this, and it was true that they lacked the experience needed. The headmaster had refuted her. He had stated that without them, the entire mission was doomed to failure because Professor Trelawny's divination said so.

While the professors were siding with Madam Bones, Daphne knew who she was going to side with.

She took a step forward.

"I want to go," Susan said before Daphne could even open her mouth.

"Susan?" Madam Bones looked at her with wide eyes.

"I want to rescue Harry," Susan said. "I know it's dangerous. I do get that. However, if our presence means you can rescue Harry, then I believe it's a small price to pay."

"It's too dangerous. I can't—"

"If it's so dangerous, then have us stay in the back," Daphne said, stepping forward to stand beside Susan. "Surround us with aurors so we're constantly protected. The divination never said that we had to be involved in the operation itself. Divinations like that are always up to interpretation. It only said that we need to be there to rescue him. It never said anything about other people. If you put together a large protection detail, then we can rescue Harry while still being safe."

Madam Bones's lips became a thin line. Daphne hoped that meant she was coming around to the idea.

"I also want to rescue Harry," Neville said. "The Potters and Longbottoms have been allies for over a century. What's more, Harry is my friend. I'd be doing a disservice to both if I didn't help rescue him."

"I'm going as well," Blaise added as he stepped forward. "I might not be able to do much, but I think my presence will be important."

One by the one, all of Harry's friends stepped forward. Tracey, Terry, Lisa, Luna, Hannah, even Astoria voiced their assent. They wanted to rescue Harry.

Headmaster Dumbledore smiled. "Amelia, if you feel like them going is too dangerous, then I have a compromise for you."

With a weary sigh as though their argument exhausted her, she turned to the headmaster. "And what is that?"

"I will go with you to rescue Harry and will personally protect these children."

Madam Bones covered her face with her hands. A sigh escaped her lips, along with a groan of what Daphne could only guess was defeat. They didn't really have time to argue. Amelia must have understood that.

"Fine," she said, giving in. "However, if something happens to them, I will personally hold you responsible."

Headmaster Dumbledore replied with a mild smile. "If something happens to them, I will hold myself responsible. Now, let's floo Sirius Black. He'll also want to be involved in this, since it's his godson we're rescuing."

XoX

Sirius Black had not been pleased to learn that his godson had been kidnapped. Daphne had listened to the floo call as Sirius spewed insults and curses like they were going out of style. She'd then witnessed Sirius storm in through the fireplace, grab Headmaster Dumbledore by the beard, and yell in his face.

Remus had stood behind the man, calmer than Sirius but still reminiscent of a brewing storm. His anger had been almost palpable.

To his credit, Headmaster Dumbledore did not retaliate. He waited until Sirius had run out of energy, and then placed a hand on the younger man's shoulder before apologizing. Sirius had accepted it. He probably knew that the headmaster wasn't at fault, since Headmaster Dumbledore

had been kicked out of Hogwarts before Harry got kidnapped.

What happened afterward was a whirlwind. Daphne and her friends were escorted out of Hogwarts alongside Sirius Black, Madam Bones, and Headmaster Dumbledore. They were then forced to wait in a sitting room within the Ministry of Magic for several hours. It was a small room, with little in the way of color and only ten seats lined across the wall. While Daphne, Astoria, and Susan had chosen to sit in chair (Dumbledore and Sirius were also in a chair), the others stood or paced along the room.

Daphne was forced to listen as Tracey complained.

"How long are we going to sit around here?" the girl asked.

"Amelia is probably gathering an auror task force," Headmaster Dumbledore told her, his smile very much like that of a grandfather's. "Please be patient."

"I hate being patient." Tracey pouted.

"Oh, believe me. We know that, Trace," Daphne said. Tracey's pout deepened.

"Do you think Harry's doing all right?" asked Hannah. "I mean, it's been several days since he was kidnapped. What if... what if they already—"

"Don't even think that way," Daphne snapped. "There's no way Harry's dead. He can't be."

Hannah looked away. "S-sorry. I didn't mean—I mean I didn't want to..."

"No." Daphne sighed as she slumped in her chair. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get angry."

"Don't worry about it. You're just worried about Harry. I understand."

Daphne didn't say anything, for she didn't think her emotions would let her talk without snapping again, but she offered Hannah a grateful smile.

"Speaking of being worried," Sirius began, "what are you kids doing

here?"

Everyone gave Sirius a deadpan stare, though only Daphne responded. "We've been with you this whole time and you're just now realizing we're here?"

While Sirius had the decency to look abashed, Headmaster Dumbledore smiled. Perhaps it was because of her sarcasm, or maybe it was thanks to Tracey's guffaws, but the Head of House Black said nothing after that. He mumbled something that none of them could hear and went quiet.

Remus spoke up soon after. "To answer your question, Ms. Abbott, I do not think Harry is in danger of dying. If whoever kidnapped him wanted him dead, they would've already killed him."

"They did try to kill him several times," Blaize pointed out.

"Did they?" Remus asked back. "I don't know about you, but I think the fact that Harry survived means their true intent wasn't to kill him off. When you think about it, their indirect manner of attacking seems more like it was designed to test Harry."

"You think they were testing him?" Lisa asked.

Shrugging, Remus offered his opinion. "It's certainly possible. The fact that they managed to kidnap Harry so easily suggests they could have done it at any time. That means they had another reason for the attacks. I can only assume they were testing his abilities for some reason. Perhaps they wanted to see how much of a fight he'd put up if they kidnapped him, or maybe there's some other reason we're not aware of."

Before anybody else could speak, the door opened and Madam Bones walked in. Her outfit had changed. She was no longer wearing her sharp DMLE head robes. She had traded them for a set of darker robes. Underneath the robes, Daphne saw a glimmer of body armor.

"The reason Harry was kidnapped doesn't matter right now," Madam Bones said, speaking to Remus. "If you'll all follow me. I've already debriefed my men on how we're going to be working. The mission to rescue Harry is starting now."

They were lead out of the room. With Madam Bones in the lead, they traveled down the hall and to an elevator, which took them down several floors. Their destination was a large room that contained nothing but people and a single object. Daphne recognized Tonks and Kingsley. Tonks was familiar with Harry and Kingsley had been their DADA professor last year. She didn't know anyone else. There were six aurors total including Madam Bones.

The object in the room was the steering wheel of a ship. It sat on a pedestal. The aurors were already standing around it. They watched Daphne and her friends as they entered the room, their disbelieving eyes showing that they either had not been informed, or had not quite believed Amelia when she told them that Harry's friends would be going on this mission.

"Gather round the portkey," Amelia said. "The coordinates have already been set. We won't be able to jump exactly to the Slytherin estate, but there's a town next to it that we can use as a starting point."

Daphne moved to stand between Astoria and Tonks. The pretty auror looked down at her with an expression that all but asked, "*What the bloody hell are you doing here?*"

"I thought Madam Bones was joking when she said you lot would be coming with us."

Daphne gave her a dry look. "Is Madam Bones the type to joke like that?"

"There's a first time for everything." Tonks shrugged.

The space around the steering wheel was tight. Along with the six aurors, there was Daphne and her friends, plus Headmaster Dumbledore, Remus, and Sirius. As things stood, Daphne felt like she and Astoria were on the verge of being squashed between Tonks and Kingsley.

"All right, everyone," Madam Bones said. "Grab onto the portkey and don't let go."

"Do not worry," Headmaster Dumbledore added. "We'll rescue Mr. Potter before you know it."

"Activate," Madam Bones said.

That must have been the activation key, because seconds later, the world around Daphne spun in a dizzying display. Everything was a blur of color. The only thing she could see clearly were the people holding onto the steering wheel with her. Sadly, that just made the way her stomach churned and threatened to push up her breakfast even more unbearable. Faster and faster the world spun. Astoria was screaming in her ear. Her hand felt slick with sweat as she wrapped her sister in a one-armed hug.

"Hang on tight!" Madam Bones shouted. "Don't you dare let go!"

Despite her words, it was impossible that all of them could hang on. There were a lot of people gripping a single object. It didn't matter that a steering wheel was decently large. It wasn't meant to have so many people holding it.

The first to let go was not one of her friends. It was an auror whose face she didn't know. His screams echoed in her ears long after he vanished from sight. The others looked grim. Letting go during portkey travel wouldn't kill someone, but there was no telling where you'd end up.

"I... I think I'm slipping!" Tracey shouted.

"Keep holding on!" Madam Bones said.

"I don't think I can!"

"I've got you!" Kingsley said as he wrapped an arm around her waist. Mere seconds after he did so, his own grasp on the wheel became tenuous. Daphne screamed as Tracey and Kingsley both slipped off and disappeared.

XoX

Susan woke up with a sharp gasp. Her body jolted, sending her into a sitting position. She looked around, blinking at the trees and foliage surrounding her. It didn't matter where she looked. There was nothing but trees, plants, animals, and the sky overhead.

"I see you're finally awake," a voice said in her ear.

Rather than shriek, Susan scrambled to her feet. She moved her hand toward where her wand was—should have been—as she spun around to face whoever had snuck up on her. All of her movements ceased when she saw who was behind her. It was...

"Tonks?"

Tonks grinned. "That's me."

Susan calmed down. "Where are we?"

Scratching her head, Tonks looked up at the sky and frowned. "There's no way to tell for certain. We were blown way off course. Tch! I knew having so many people use a single portkey was a bad idea. All that magic must have interfered with our ability to properly port. Still, I don't think we're that far from our original destination. From what I understand, Slytherin's home is supposed to be located in a forested valley of some kind."

It did indeed appear as though they were in a forest of some sort. She couldn't quite tell if they were in a valley. The trees blocked out much of the sky except what was immediately overhead. Strange sounds, the cawing of birds and the groaning of animals, played a mysterious melody that sounded ominous somehow.

Susan noticed her wand lying several meters away. She walked over and picked it up, checking to see if it had broken during her fall. Nothing seemed wrong. She couldn't even find a crack, though it was a little dirty. It would need to be cleaned once she got back to Hogwarts.

"We should probably begin walking," Tonks suggested. "See if we can't find that village. We should at least try to figure out where we are."

"Can you apparate us?" Susan asked.

Tonks shook her head. "Not when I don't know the first thing about this place. It's dangerous apparating out of places you don't know. Only thing worse is apparating blind." Susan nodded and Tonks grinned. "Well, at

least it could be worse."

"How so?"

"We could've been alone."

Susan couldn't fault that logic, and together, she and Tonks picked a direction and began walking. Leaves and twigs crunched underneath their feet. The sounds seemed to become louder, or perhaps it was merely her perception of them. Susan turned her head as she tried to spot the animals that she could hear, but she saw none, perhaps because it was impossible to see through the thick tree branches.

"Watch out!" Tonks shouted.

Susan stopped moving and looked around. She turned and was just in time to see a mouth filled with sharp fangs in her vision. Shrieking, she stumbled backwards.

"Incendio!"

A brilliant cone of flames slammed into the snake before it could reach her, incinerating the whole thing in seconds. Susan looked at Tonks with wide eyes. The young auror was sighing as she walked up to her.

"You okay?" she asked, holding out a hand.

"Uh, yeah. Thank you," Susan said as she let Tonks help her up.

Susan had no idea how long they walked, though it felt like hours. The trees eventually broke away, revealing a small dirt road that appeared untrod by human feet. With nothing else to do, they followed the road, eventually coming upon...

"A village?"

Wooden houses of varying sizes sat haphazardly along the road. All of them were dilapidated with age. The walls of several had been torn down, there was mold growing on a few of them, vines encroached upon whatever remained, and there wasn't a soul in sight. Susan glanced to

her right. What once appeared to have been a clothing store was now rubble, with only the a broken sign with the word *M***lic Clothes* written on it to signify what it had been.

"What do you think happened here?" Tonks asked no one in particular.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Susan answered, despite recognizing the rhetoric behind Tonks's question.

They wandered further into the village. It wasn't that large, maybe about forty buildings in total. As they neared the other side, the sound of running feet made her ears twitch. She and Tonks both spun around, their wands out, prepared for anything. That was when Astoria rushed out from between two buildings.

"Stori! Wait up!" Daphne shouted as she rushed out of the same alley. She stopped upon spotting Susan and Tonks. "You two!"

"See?" Astoria grinned, stopping in the middle of the street. "I told you I heard voices down this way."

"I'm glad to see you two," Susan said, rushing up to Daphne and taking the other girl's hand. "I was worried we wouldn't run into anyone here."

"Me too." Daphne smiled as she returned Susan's grip. "Speaking of, I take it you two don't know where the others are?"

"Nope," Tonks said. She walked up to them much more slowly. Her eyes constantly surveyed the area around her. "Even so, I think the others should be in the general area. We were blown off course, but we were close to our destination. I imagine the others are somewhere in this forest."

"Headmaster Dumbledore was of the same mind," Daphne said as if to confirm a suspicion.

"Is the headmaster here?" asked Susan.

"Nope," Astoria was the one to reply. "When we got thrown off the portkey, the headmaster was with us. We actually ended up in this

village. He told us to wait here while he went to locate the others."

"That was probably a good idea," Tonks said.

"It's really boring, though," Astoria whined. "I want to do something."

"Patience, Stori," Daphne said. "This isn't a game. We can't just go off on our own."

Astoria pouted. "I know that. I'm just saying I wish there was something to do."

Daphne gave Susan a helpless glare when she giggled, but it really couldn't have been helped. It was just too funny to see Daphne act like this.

Back during their first year, Daphne's personality had been cold. She scorned the people around her, refused to spend time with anyone but Tracey and Blaize, and she always presented people with this chilly front, as though she had been made from ice. While that ice had thawed thanks to Harry, she had still been cool, collected, and sarcastic most of the time. Seeing how Daphne acted with her sister, so different from what Susan was used to, was simply too amusing.

Since they didn't have anything to do but wait, Susan followed Daphne and Astoria to where they had been staying before the younger of the two ran off. It was one of the few buildings that remained fully intact. Larger than the others and made of brick instead of wood, Susan could only guess that it held more importance than the rest of the buildings. Perhaps it had belonged to the town mayor?

The door creaked as they walked inside. A musty smell hit Susan's nose, causing it to wrinkle. It was the stench of mildew. There was no carpet inside. The floor was made of stone. There also weren't any furnishings, though she could see what appeared to be the broken down remains of a chair. She wondered how old this village was. How long had this place been abandoned?

With nowhere to sit, Susan stood next to a wall. She was careful not to touch it. Even though it looked sturdy enough, there was no telling what

might happen if there was any added weight; it could collapse for all she knew.

"How long do you think it's gonna be before Dumbledore comes back?" asked Tonks.

Daphne shrugged. "Hard to say. I suppose it would depend on how far apart everyone is and how long it takes him to find them."

"I guess you're right," Tonks said.

"I'm bored," Astoria added.

"We know," Daphne and Susan said at the same time.

XoX

They ended up waiting several hours for the headmaster to locate all of their friends and the aurors they had been with. One by one their friends appeared, most of them with an auror by their side. It appeared that a good portion of the people with them had ended up with partners after getting flung off course.

Blaize was the first to show up. He was quickly followed by Tracey, who showed up alongside Kinglsey Shacklebolt. Soon after, Lisa, Hannah, and Luna arrived. Then Neville and Terry appeared together alongside Madam Bones.

"It looks like everyone is here," Madam Bones said. "That's good. At least we know that no one was flung into a mountain now."

"Why does it sound like you were expecting us to get thrown into a mountain?" asked Tracey, suspicion leaking through her voice.

"It's been known to happen." As Tracey paled, Madam Bones looked around at everyone's face. Then she nodded once. "Time is precious, so we're moving out now. Fortunately, we've already located Slytherin's manor thanks to Ignius here." A man with plain features and dull brown hair waved a hand. "He discovered the manor when he was flung off the portkey. He'll lead us there."

That appeared to be the end of the conversation, because Madam Bones lead them all outside. They left the abandoned village behind. As they were walking, Susan looked back at the place, her mind brimming with curiosity. Headmaster Dumbledore moved to walk alongside her.

"That village was once known as Elabidae," he told her. "It was a lot like Godric's Hollow back during the early first century. Sadly, it fell to ruin during one of the many wars that plagued that time."

"So it was abandoned?" Susan asked.

Headmaster Dumbledore shook his head. "While I am unclear on the details of what transpired here, I do know that Elabidea fell to ruin some time after Salazar Slytherin created Hogwarts. It seems an invading nation of muggles had come and slaughtered everyone who lived in the village."

"T-that's terrible."

The headmaster's sad smile was reflected back at her. "It is indeed. It's especially tragic because it was the invasion itself that changed Salazar into the cruel and hateful man that he would become later in life." He paused. "I'm not sure I could blame him for what happened. From what little text of that time survived, it seems his entire family was killed during the attack. The invaders stole into his house and butchered his family. It was Salazar's turning point—or so I've been lead to believe."

Susan didn't have much to say about that. However, Daphne, who walked along on Susan's other side with Astoria, looked up at the headmaster, a question reflected in her eyes.

"What do you mean by turning point?"

"What I mean is that it was after the slaughter of his family that Salazar Slytherin became the pureblood supremacist that we know of him from the history books. It was said that until that point, Salazar had been a kind and caring individual. I have an old journal from Godric Gryffindor, and one of the entries stated that Salazar was the most patient and affable teacher among them."

"I see."

Daphne grew silent after that. Susan didn't know what was going on through her friends mind, but she imagined the blonde girl was absorbing everything that the headmaster had told her. Perhaps she was shocked by this knowledge. Susan sure was.

The road eventually disappeared the further they got from the village, though it might have been more accurate to say that the road had become overgrown with plants. Susan nearly tripped over a vine several times. If it weren't for Daphne catching her, she might have fallen on her face like Tracey had when her foot got stuck in a root.

"Bloody fucking dammit!" Tracey growled as she rubbed her now red nose. "That hurts!"

"Please mind your language, Ms. Davis," Headmaster Dumbledore said lightly, though with a hint of sternness.

"I don't see why everyone makes a big deal out of my language." Tracey scowled.

"Because it's not befitting of a lady," Madam Bones said.

"Because you're just a brat," Tonks added.

"I can't believe you two are making fun of me," Tracey said.

Terry grinned at her. "Why not? It's not that hard to do."

"Can it, Boot!"

Susan had no idea what they were looking for. A large mansion hidden within a sea of trees? A castle fortress built into a mountain? As she was wondering about what kind of place Salazar Slytherin's home was, their procession came to a sudden halt when her auntie raised a hand.

"Charline?" she asked the only female auror aside from her and Tonks. The one named Charline was a fit young woman with black hair and skin a shade darker than Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Nodding, Charline unholstered her wand and began waving it around. Nothing happened at first, but then the area in front of them glowed a light blue. The blue light expanded, slowly at first but picking up speed, eventually turning into what looked like a large dome.

"It's a barrier," Charline announced. "A nasty one, too. It looks like whoever made this wanted to kill anyone coming here. This barrier is designed to fry the insides of whoever tries to pass this point."

Susan's body shook. Beside her, even Daphne seemed slightly pale at this knowledge. Unlike the her and the other kids, who were pale and withdrawn, Sirius Black whistled.

"That's quite the ward, though it sounds like it's new."

"New?" Blaize asked.

"Yep."

"How do you figure?"

Sirius's lips peeled back to reveal a grin. "Because if the scheme was older, it would've done more than just fry your insides."

Blaize looked away. "And now I regret asking that question."

"Times were different back then," Remus added. "These days we have a lot of rules and policies about how we treat prisoners and what's considered self-defense over in-excess. They didn't have any laws like that back then. It's why old ward schemes for Noble Houses like the Blacks are so deadly."

"How can you tell what the barrier does?" asked the ever curious Lisa.

"The nargles probably told her," Luna said. "They're all over this area."

"I'm a decoder," Charline said as she began waving her wand again. "That's sort of like Gringott's curse breakers, but I don't break into ancient ruins. My primary job is taking down the wards surrounding the houses of criminals and the like."

"Charline spent twenty years learning how to decode and break down wards," Madam Bones added.

"You always were fascinated by warding schemes," Headmaster Dumbledore said. "I am pleased to see that you continued to follow your passion after graduating from Hogwarts."

Charline didn't look away from her work, but she did smile. "Thanks, Headmaster."

Susan watched Charline as she wove her wand in complicated, seemingly never ending patterns. She had no idea what the woman was doing. Every now and then, Charline would stop, frown at something that nobody seemed capable of seeing but her, and then she would start wand waving again.

"She's decoding the wards based on the barrier's magical scheme," Daphne said.

"Excuse me?" Susan asked, startled.

Daphne nodded at Charline. "Wards like this are based on numerous arithmetic sequences that, when combined, create a barrier designed to serve a specific function. People like Charline can read and decode those sequences by using a unique form of magic sight."

"I didn't know that," Susan said.

"I didn't know that you knew that," Tracey added. "Where the frack did you learn this?"

"Language," Daphne said before sighing. "I learned it from the books in Father's library."

Susan and Tracey waited for Daphne to say more. When it became apparent that she was done speaking, they turned to Astoria, who caught their eyes and shrugged.

"Don't look at me. I don't know squat about wards."

"Is learning magic sight hard?" asked Neville.

"It varies from person to person, but learning basic magic sight is generally an easy thing to do," Headmaster Dumbledore said. "The problem is honing your magic sight to see arithmetic equations. That can take decades. Charline is actually one of the people who mastered the skill faster than most."

"Oh..."

As they spoke, Charline continued to work on breaking down the barrier. Susan couldn't see what she was doing beyond her wand movements. However, judging from the way Headmaster Dumbledore stared at the barrier, she assumed that he could see the ward schemes as they were being systematically destroyed. Nearly half an hour into her work, the blue barrier that had been erected around the vicinity suddenly disappeared.

"There." Charline sighed. "It's done. The ward's have been destroyed."

"Excellent work," Madam Bones said, clapping Charline on the shoulder. She then turned to the others. "I want all of you to form ranks. The children will be in the middle. Kinglsey and I will take the lead, and Headmaster Dumbledore and Tonks will cover our rear. Sirius, Remus, Charline, and Ignius will take positions on either side of the children. Follow me and be careful. Considering the purpose of that barrier, it's clear that someone is here, and they are definitely hostile."

Moving slowly, as though afraid of what they could find, the group traveled into what could very well be the belly of the beast.

XoX

The Slytherin manor was smaller than Daphne had expected it to be. Granted, as she walked out from between the trees and came upon the building that could have only belonged to Salazar's family, she hadn't been sure what to expect. Even so, a building that looked more like a normal two-story house had not been it. There were no embellishments, no decorations, nothing to distinguish this house as belonging to Salazar Slytherin.

"Are you surprised?" Headmaster Dumbledore asked upon seeing the expression of Daphne and her friends. "You shouldn't be. Do not forget that Salazar lived during the first century. Homes back then didn't have the pomp and ostentatiousness of current houses, not even those belonging to families like the Slytherins. Even Hogwarts was not originally the castle that you all learn in."

"I'm still kinda underwhelmed here," Tracey. "I was expecting a massive mansion. My parents's house is bigger than this!"

"During the first century, this was considered large," Remus assured in a mild-mannered voice, sounding every bit the consummate instructor.

Madam Bones turned around after surveying the house and looked at all of them, her face appearing even more stern than usual. "Okay, everyone. This is it. From here on out, I want you kids to listen to every word I say. If I say run, you run. Do you understand me? The time for rebelliousness is officially over. If you can't follow my instructions, then I'll tie you up and leave you behind."

Daphne didn't say anything. She stared at the faces of her friends. Lisa's features were a tad pale, and Hannah wasn't looking too good either. They were probably the least experienced with any sort of violence. Luna looked somewhat composed, albeit, Daphne couldn't read Luna like the others. Terry also didn't look good, but he was a boy, so he put on a brave front. No doubt he wanted to appear strong in front of everyone else. Even Blaise had a nervous sweat trickling down his forehead.

Neville, oddly enough, did not appear worried on the surface. His face was stony. It was like he'd put a mask on. Daphne wondered if this was because of all the training he did with Harry, or if perhaps his pride was keeping him from displaying any fear.

A hand slid into hers and gripped it tight, causing Daphne to glance at Astoria. Her sister's shoulders were shaking as she stared at the manor. No doubt the girl was afraid. While Daphne didn't say anything, even she felt weary. The atmosphere of this place was stifling and frightful, like there was something lurking beneath the surface that would leap out at them if given the chance.

Taking their silence as affirmation, Madam Bones gestured for everyone to follow her. She lead them up to the manor. An ancient door stood in front of the entrance. Oddly enough, while much of the building appeared aging, and even the door looked old, it was also in better shape than she had expected. There was no mildew, no mold, no splinters or anything of that nature. It looked well-maintained, as though someone had taken to cleaning it daily.

"There's magical residue on this door," Ignius said. He waved his wand and the door began to glow with a green light. "It looks like someone's been using cleaning and repair charms on it."

"Then we can probably expect the inside to be the same," Madam Bones said. "Charline and Ignius, you two take point. The rest of us will follow you. Be wary of traps."

"Yes, ma'am," the two aurors said in unison.

They opened the door, not slowly, but quickly, and Charline and Ignius rushed in with wands at the ready. Madam Bones followed them, her own wand out. She gestured for them to stay where they were as she, Ignius and Charline spread out. Daphne thought they were surveying the area for potential traps. After several more seconds, Madam Bones gestured for them to enter.

The floorboards creaked as they walked in. Squealing and groaning, Daphne almost flinched at the sound of aged wood, wondering if it might break under their combined weight. The walls and ceiling all looked new—or at least newly repaired. There was none of the age or dullness she had expected. It showed that someone had probably used more repairing charms on this place; Daphne assumed that person was the same one who'd kidnapped Harry.

The room they had entered was a small foyer; there was a staircase leading to the second floor, and hallways on either side of the staircase lead further into the first floor. It was built in the same style as her father's manor, only it was a lot smaller and the floors weren't made of marble.

"Wands out," Madam Bones said. "We should be prepared for anything."

Daphne, Susan, and everyone else silently pulled out their wands. Sirius also unholstered his new wand at the same time as Remus, and Headmaster Dumbledore already had his out and at the ready. For just a second, Daphne thought she saw the headmaster's face harden. However, it was only like that for an instant before reverting back to normal. It must have been a trick of the light.

"We'll explore the first floor before checking the second," Madam Bones explained. "Kingsley, you're on point."

"Yes, ma'am," Kingsley said.

"This is getting kinda freaky," Tracey murmured.

"You mean it's getting real," Hannah said. "I'm not sure I... like this very much."

Daphne wanted to tell her that if she didn't like this, then she shouldn't have decided to come. She couldn't bring herself to. Few people would ever wanted to do something like this. Hannah was pushing herself for Harry. She couldn't ask the girl for anything more.

They went down the left hallway first. There were no lights, so the corridor was darker than Daphne was comfortable with. At least she could still see. Even so, she'd have liked to see more than just vague outlines and little to know color.

There were doors along the some of the walls. Madam Bones and Kingsley checked inside of the rooms, declaring each of them clear and having them move on. Daphne frowned at one point when she noticed that Tracey, who'd been walking beside her, was no longer beside her. She turned around and grimaced when she saw the girl taking a peek inside of the room that Kingsley had said had nothing in it.

"Come here, you."

"Owch! Ow, ow, ow. Let go of my ear."

"I will when you learn not to move around on your own." Daphne pulled the girl back in line. "There's no telling what kind of dangerous situations

we might run into. You have to be more careful."

"I get it! I get it! Just let go!"

"Be quiet, you two," Madam Bones snapped. "You're both being too loud. We don't want whoever is here to be alerted to our presence."

"Sorry," Daphne apologized as she let go of Tracey's ear. Her friend grimaced and rubbed her ear, which was now a light red.

"Damn, that hurt."

"Sorry."

"Ugh... it's fine."

They continued moving. All of the rooms were declared empty. After two turns, Daphne realized that the hallway was looping around. They would probably end up back in the foyer if they kept moving.

"Ma'am, I believe I've found something," Kingsley said. He was standing next to an open doorway, and, having already peered inside, he was now staring at Madam Bones.

"What is it?" asked Madam Bones as she walked over to Kingsley. She peered inside of the door, hummed, and then came back. "It looks like this is a kitchen. There's some left over food on the tables. That at least tells us that someone is living here. It doesn't look like there's anything else, so let's keep moving."

The longer they searched this place, the more anxious Daphne became. She could hear her heart pounding in her chest. Worry for Harry wracked her nerves and made her hands become slippery with sweat. She glanced at the others. All of her friends seemed to feel the same way she did. They were pale, nervous sweat trickling down their brows. Neville was even wiping his hands on his robes.

The hallway they were in did indeed come full circle. They ended up back in the foyer. Since they had already checked the first floor, the group ascended the stairs. Like floor one, there were two directions they could

take. They decided to go right this time.

Their footsteps thudded along the hall, the sound echoing abnormally loudly in Daphne's ears. She could hear her own breathing pick up as they checked each room. There was nothing. There was no one.

Until they got to the last room.

"We've found him!" Kingsley declared after peering into the room furthest from the stairs. "It's Harry and someone else. Female. Red hair."

"That would be Ginerva Weasley," Madam Bones said. "Let's secure them and check to see if they're all right."

Daphne tried to rush into the room, but Madam Bones looked at the group, halting them before they could proceed in.

"Wait here until we declare the place secure—hey, wait! Daphne! Don't rush in!"

Daphne pushed past Madam Bones and ran into the room. There was nothing special about the room itself. It was a plain room with no carpet, gray walls, and a ceiling. There were no furnishings. However, lying in the center of the room were two figures, Harry and Ginny, both of whom lay crumpled on the floor.

"Harry!"

The shout had not come from her, but from Susan. Daphne was almost shocked when the redhead rushed past her and knelt down in front of Harry. She placed a hand on Harry's shoulder as if to rouse him from slumber.

"Harry! Harry, can you hear me? Say something!"

Before Daphne could reach him, before Kingsley could get Susan away from Harry, before anyone could do anything else, strange laughter bubbled from Harry's throat. It was a strange, gurgling laugh, so unlike Harry's normal laughter. Daphne slowed down as she reached him. Standing by Harry's feet, she couldn't contain the rising sense of

wrongness as Harry's insane laughter echoed around the room.

And then Harry spoke in a voice that was Harry's but not at the same time.

"You're all too late," he cackled. "This body... is mine!"

Daphne had just enough time to see a flash of red before the entire floor collapsed beneath them.

There are two more chapters left. I hope you all enjoy these last few chapters.

Harry Versus Tom

Author's Note: It looks like I miscalculated the length of this story. This is the last chapter of Ties that Bind. I know this book was shorter than my other ones, but that was mostly because this was a transitional book. It doesn't necessarily have much to do with the main plot. It's mainly here to add in more subplots that will be expanded upon later. Ties that Bind is also my most original fanfiction, which is kinda paradoxical, but bear with me for a moment. I'm pretty sure everyone has noticed how this book didn't follow the cannon storyline at all. Writing something that had to be both original and accurate to the cannon was more difficult than I thought it would be. Anyway, please enjoy the last chapter of Harry Potter and the Ties that Bind.

Chapter 23

Harry Versus Tom

The world around Harry was no longer what it had been. There was no ground, yet somehow he was standing. There were no walls, yet Harry still felt confined. The sky overhead was nothing but a dull, uniform gray that extended far beyond his line of sight. This place was not the prison that he'd been locked up in.

This is...

"This is your mind," a voice said to him.

Harry turned. Walking—no, striding toward him with a confident gait was Tom Riddle, the man who had kidnapped him. He looked different, young but old, handsome but ugly. His skin had become more white than when Harry had confronted his diary self. Likewise, his eyes were not brown but yellow. His fingers, which Harry could see peeking from his robes, were long and spindly, like a skeletons.

Tom Riddle continued. *"To be more exact, this is the space that I have*

created between your mind and mine. I suppose you could call it a link where our minds have melded together."

Harry frowned. He had not realized there was a spell that could accomplish such a thing. This must have been one of the more esoteric rituals, something that only a few people in the entire world knew of. It could have even been an original spell.

His frown deepened the longer he stared at Tom. There was something not right here. Harry felt on edge. His scalp was prickling, the hairs on his arms were standing on end, and his mind was blaring sirens to warn him of danger. All of the signs directed him toward one conclusion.

Is it just me, or is he more powerful than before?

"I am indeed more powerful," Tom Riddle said. His mouth didn't move, but Harry heard him all the same. *"And it's all thanks to you. Who knew there'd be a piece of me locked away inside of your mind. Well, at least now I know why the killing curse failed. I won't make that mistake again."*

Harry had no idea what this man was talking about. A piece of himself? What did that mean? Regardless of what he did and didn't know, Harry knew one thing for sure. Whatever was going on here, it was clear that this, right now, was the point where Tom Riddle was going to try and take over his body.

I'm not going to let that happen.

Tom Riddle smirked. *"You don't have a choice."*

There was no prelude to their battle. Tom's wand flashed and a streak of red lightning erupted from the tip like a bolt of lightning arcing across the night sky. Harry threw himself out of the way, grimacing as he was jolted by the attack. If he could feel Tom's spell even though he had dodged, that meant this man had a lot more power than most. He couldn't afford to be hit directly.

Two wands appeared in Harry's hands, exact replicas of the ones he had in the real world. It seemed that whatever he wanted to have happen here could happen. This was his mind, or perhaps the link between his

mind and Tom's. That meant they could change the rules to suit their needs. In this battle, it would come down to skill, power, and will.

Harry jabbed his wand forward. Flames burst from the tip, a roaring cone of fire that took the shape of an eastern dragon. The monster roared as it charged forward. It sadly didn't get very far, though, as a smirking Tom waved his wand and the flames suddenly reversed course, shifting from bright yellow to dark crimson.

There was no time to dodge.

Gritting his teeth as he thrust out his wand, Harry created a silvery barrier that the dragon slammed into. The shock wave from the attack could be felt even through his shield. Harry fell to a knee as cracks spread along the luminescent dome protecting him.

With his lips twisting into a snarl, Harry raised his mother's wand and gave it a wave. Water blasted from the tip. It struck the shield, and then moved phased through the shield, striking the fire dragon head on. The ball slammed through the dragon, which dispersed, flames shooting in all directions.

Like a cannon it burst out of the other side and sailed toward Tom, who raised a dark black shield that it slammed into. The barrier held. Then it morphed into a massive black snake that towered over Harry as though it was a titan from Greek mythology. It hissed at him and leapt forward, its fanged mouth spread wide to swallow him whole.

Harry flicked his wands at the ground. Two explosions launched him in the air, propelling him over the snake. He flicked his wands at the creature, sending a series of *maxima bombarda* spells into its magical hide. The snake was destroyed. He landed back on the ground and the battle began anew.

"I'm always impressed by your talent, Potter!" Tom cackled. "I knew after you defeated me that I had to have your body, and now I'm going to take it for myself!"

"There's no way I'll let you take my body," Harry retorted.

Tom laughed some more. *"You don't have a choice in the matter."*

The fight continued, with Harry and Tom throwing spells, countering spells, and dodging spells with equal fervor. Lightning flew from wands. Fire rained from the sky. Creatures of ancient myth were created from the ether to fight on either side. Harry did his best to counter Tom's attacks and retaliate with his own. Yet the longer the fight continued, the more Harry began to realize...

Tom was better than him. Tom knew more spells than him. Tom was more refreshed than him.

Harry had spent the past several days being starved, isolated, and beaten both physically and mentally. Before this battle had started, he was already approaching his limit. The longer the battle wore on, the more his mind deteriorated. His spells became slower, his power waned, and no matter how much harder he tried to push himself, he could not surpass the insurmountable wall that had been placed in front of him.

It felt like Harry was fighting while stuck in a pool of sludge. His limbs became heavy. His mind became fuzzy. His vision was darkening. The world spun. He could scarcely breathe. Everything was getting blurry and he couldn't seem to lift his hands anymore.

Tom Riddle grinned at him.

"Good night, Harry."

There was a flash of red. The last thing Harry heard was Tom Riddle's laughter.

XoX

Daphne opened her eyes to find herself trapped within a glimmering silver barrier. Sitting up, she looked around, immediately spotting Astoria, Susan, Hannah, and Remus. They were within her in the barrier, awake and staring at something. Daphne turned her head.

That something was the battle happening between Harry and the aurors. Daphne had never seen anything like it. Harry wasn't using a wand, but

spells were being launched from his hands. Red bolts of lightning, blue beams of water, shards of ice, every element flew from his hands and at the aurors, who raised their shields to defend themselves.

Harry was laughing all the while. "What's the matter?! Can you not defeat me?! Hahahaha! You're all weak! Pathetic! No wonder it was so easy for me to steal this body. You're all incompetent!"

"W-what's going on?" Daphne asked. "What happened to Harry?"

"I'm afraid that isn't Harry anymore," Headmaster Dumbledore said, shocking Daphne. She hadn't even noticed his presence, but now she realized that the reason she and the others were protected by a barrier was because the headmaster had created it. She could see the thin strands linking his wand to the dome surrounding her and another one several meters away.

"What do you mean that isn't Harry anymore?" asked Astoria.

"I mean that he's been possessed," Headmaster Dumbledore explained. "And it looks like a full possession to."

"What does that mean?" Susan asked, stroking something red. It was only now that Daphne noticed the unconscious Ginny Weasley with her head on Susan's lap.

"I means that Harry's mind and soul has been suppressed by whoever is possessing him," Remus said, his hands clenched. "A full possession is when someone sends their soul into another body and gains absolute control over it."

Daphne didn't understand the idea of possession, but she understood the gist of it. Someone else was currently inhabiting Harry's body, suppressing his mind and spirit in order to control his body, or something like that. The only thing she cared about was that Harry's body was being used by somebody else. That was unforgivable.

"Hahahaha! What's the matter? Are you having trouble hitting me?!" The usurper said with Harry's voice. He waved his hand, causing the ground in front of him to explode. It became a wave, which swept toward the

aurors as if to bury them alive.

Madam Bones stood at the helm, waving her wand in a complicated pattern. Strange slivers of nearly invisible energy sliced through the air. They cut into the wave. The wave was split apart into several hundred slices and fell apart.

That was when Tonks jabbed her wand at the remains. The ground shifted and combined, growing bigger and bigger until it had become a massive golem. The golem raised its gargantuan hand and brought it down toward Harry. It didn't even get close to hitting him. Seconds after it began to bring its hand down, it caught fire. It wasn't just any fire either. This fire screamed and raged, hissed and spat like venomous serpents. Fiendfyre. The dark fire used primarily by wizards who've steeped themselves in the dark arts.

The golem disintegrated.

"Hahahaha!" The insane laughter of Harry's possessor echoed around the room. "This body is perfect! I've never felt so much power flowing through me before." The face of Harry darkened in ways that Daphne had never seen before. "There's even more power in this body than my original body when I was his age. Were it not so useful, I'd have killed this boy for his pertinence."

"You won't be doing any killing today, Tom," Headmaster Dumbledore said.

"Tom?" Madam Bones asked with a frown.

"Harry" laughed. "Ah, Dumbledore. I was wondering when you would recognize me. Was it the spells? It was, wasn't it? I bet you recognized them."

"It was hard not to," the headmaster replied mildly. "I've seen you use those spells many times during our numerous fights."

"Dumbledore, who is this?" asked Madam Bones.

The headmaster sighed. "That... is none other than the man you all know

as Lord Voldemort."

It was like everyone in the room had been struck by lightning; those words were so shocking. Voldemort? He was the one who had possessed Harry? How? He shouldn't have been anywhere near Harry, unless...

"Ginny," Daphne mumbled.

"Excuse me?" asked Susan.

"He was possessing Ginny before Harry," Daphne explained. "That's how he slipped past Hogwarts defenses. He was probably buried deep inside of Ginny's mind, which is why it didn't activate any defenses. V-Voldemort must have been biding his time and waiting until Dumbledore was gone. I bet he even launched that attack on Hogsmeade knowing that Lucius Malfoy would somehow force Headmaster Dumbledore to leave Hogwarts."

While she had no evidence to support this, she was positive it was true. The ambush in the Shrieking Shack. The attack on Hogsmeade. The incident with the suits of armor attacking Harry. There was no one else who had the means or motive to do such things. Plus, he had been there this whole time, hiding within the body of an unsuspecting girl. No one would have imagined that Ginny was responsible for this.

"You mean all this time we've been hanging out with the dark lord?" Astoria wrinkled her nose. "That's gross."

Daphne didn't respond to her sister. Her eyes were locked on the battle that had begun anew. Voldemort in Harry's body had created a whip made of fiendfyre in his left hand. The other hand was casting everything from standard cutting curses to darker spells, a few of which Daphne recognized from her father's library.

Madam Bones and the other aurors did their best to fight against Voldemort. Several would defend against his attacks while the others would attack in turn. Perhaps it was due to her talent, but Madam Bones acted as both defender and attacker. She launched spells while creating barriers and even countering several of the spells thrown at her. Despite

how well she was doing, how well they were defending against Voldemort, he was still pushing them back.

Several curses leapt from the wands of Tonks and Kingsley, who acted as their primary attackers. The spells never reached their target. Voldemort waved his—Harry's—hand, and the spells suddenly reversed course. They stopped when Charline and Ignius created shields, but then Voldemort waved his hands and those shields broke. Ignius and Charline's screams echoed across the room as the backlash sent them to their knees.

Laughing, Voldemort raised another hand. Several small spheres of crackling dark energy appeared above his head and were sent hurtling toward Charline and Ignius. Madame Bones stepped in front of them. She slashed her wand horizontally through the air. A massive gust erupted from the tip and slammed into the crackling spheres, forcing them to detonate.

Susan, Astoria, and Hannah screamed as a fierce wind erupted around their dome. Crackling black energy coruscated off the surface. The shields flickered as though it was about to break.

"I don't want to be here anymore!" Hannah screamed.

Daphne understood her. This was beyond them. Even part of her mind was telling her to flee... but she couldn't. Harry was suffering, his mind suppressed. She wanted to do something for him. She wanted to save him, even if she knew that there was nothing she could do.

"Do not worry," Headmaster Dumbledore said to them, grunting as though he was struggling against an unknown assailant. The magic threads attaching his wand to the shields wavered before being restored. "I'll not let any of you get hurt."

The magic dispersed soon, allowing Daphne a clear view of the battle. Charline and Ignius were back on their feet. Their movements were sluggish, though. Tonks and Kingsley were compensating by switching to defense. Meanwhile, Madame Bones was a whirlwind fighting against the monster that had taken over Harry's body.

They were tiring. Their movements were slowing down. Shields were barely being raised in time to block spells, and each shield cracked and shattered, unleashing a powerful backlash that hurt the ones raising them. Shield breaker. It was a powerful curse used in dueling that was cast by overloading shield spells with magic that had been polarized using a theory Daphne knew little about. Each time it was used, the spell injured and zapped the strength of the person who'd cast a shield spell.

Only Madam Bones was in good enough shape to keep fighting strong. She barely used any shields, and when she did, it was to counter a spell and bring it down immediately after. The dark lord couldn't use shield breaker on her. That said, it didn't seem to matter since he was still pushing her back through other means.

"Headmaster?" Daphne started. "Why are you not fighting? If you were the one fighting against the dark lord, I'm sure you could beat him."

The headmaster's smile seemed unusually somber. "It is true that if I were to fight, I would win... but I'm afraid doing so might destroy Harry in the process." Daphne's eyes widened as the headmaster looked at the battle. "Harry's magic is powerful, and when combined with Tom's wide array of deadly spells, I would not be able to hold back while fighting."

So even the headmaster was incapable of doing anything to save Harry. That didn't bode well. Daphne glanced at the battle. Ignius and Tonks were both down, and they were being protected by Charline and Kingsley. Yet those two were taking a beating. Even Madam Bones was beginning to show her fatigue in her slowing movements and the cuts that were starting to litter her body as spells slipped past her defense.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Daphne asked, clenching her hands. "At this rate... at this rate Harry will—"

"There is something that you can do," Headmaster Dumbledore said. "However, it's a dangerous endeavor. I don't know if it's worth the risk."

Daphne felt her determination harden. "What can I do? If there's something I can do, tell me and I'll do it."

Headmaster Dumbledore smiled, though it was filled with weariness.

"Harry is still inside. Tom cannot separate Harry's soul from his body right now. That would require a ritual that takes far more time than he can afford to spend at the moment. I believe it's possible to bring Harry's mind to the surface. However, it's going to take something that only a few people in this world can give."

"What is that?" Daphne asked.

"Love." Daphne blinked. The headmaster smiled. "If you can show Harry how loved he is, how much you need him with you, I believe that he can push Tom out of his mind. At the very least, he should be able to suppress Tom so that I can seal him away."

"What do you need me to do?" Daphne asked.

"I need you to try anything you can think of to bring Harry back," the headmaster said. "It will have to be something drastic, though."

Daphne looked back at the battle, at the cackling Harry as he tossed fireballs at the aurors, who were down to just Madam Bones. She was straining, struggling. It wouldn't be long before she lost.

Harry...

She looked back at the headmaster. "I'll do it."

"And I'll help," Sirius's voice said. Daphne blinked. She hadn't realized it, but Sirius was sitting in the other dome alongside Blaise, Neville, Terry, Trace, and Luna. "That's my godson over there. You can't expect me not to help out, especially since you're the reason I'm stuck behind this damn barrier."

The headmaster smiled. "I apologize for that, but had I let you out, you would've tried to join the fight. The aurors are a well-oiled machine that utilizes teamwork. Your participation would have ruined that."

"Whatever. Just let me help Harry now and we'll call it even."

"I'll be helping as well," Remus said as he stood up and drew his wand. He was bleeding from a cut on his forehead, but he appeared ready.

"Very well." Headmaster Dumbledore nodded. "Now, it's unfortunate, but when I drop these barriers, I would like the rest of you to run. I cannot protect more than one person here. Can all of you do that?"

"I... I want to help too," Susan mumbled.

Headmaster Dumbledore shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I can only protect one, and I believe Daphne is most suited towards this task right now. You are currently lacking in determination and resolve when it comes to your feelings for Harry, whereas Daphne already has her heart set."

Susan looked away. Daphne had spoken with her many times about Harry. She wanted Susan's help in securing a future. Even if Susan couldn't be Harry's first wife thanks to her status as the heiress to the Ancient and Most Noble House of Bones, she could take the position of second wife. If Susan did that and Daphne became Harry's mistress, it meant she would have three of the Founding Five Houses behind her back. She and Astoria would be protected from their father's machinations.

"It looks like we're nearly out of time," the headmaster said. Indeed, it looked like Madam Bones was on her last leg. The dark lord was just toying with her now. "I'm going to drop the barrier. When I do, all of you except Daphne will run out of here and get as far away from possible. Sirius, Remus, I'll let you two stay, but I won't be able to protect either of you."

"Don't worry about that," Sirius said with a grin, his wand already in hand. "I can protect myself just fine."

"I'll keep Sirius from getting injured," Remus said.

Headmaster Dumbledore nodded. "Susan, take Ginny with you."

Susan hesitated for a second, but she soon nodded. "Okay..."

"It's time! I'm dropping the barrier!"

Daphne barely had a moment to think about her situation. The barrier

dropped a mere second after Dumbledore spoke, and from that moment on, everything became chaos. Her friends were running one way. Sirius and Remus were leaping into the fray against the Voldemort possessed Harry, and she was following behind Dumbledore as he protected her from errant spells that came their way.

"Snap out of it, Harry!" Sirius said as he threw a slew of spells that Daphne couldn't name at Tom. They were all swatted away like bugs.

Tom Riddle laughed. "Harry's not coming back, you fool! This body is mine now!"

"Like hell it is!" Sirius snarled as he waved his wand at the broken down wall. The wall changed into numerous vines that tried to grab Tom. "Get out of my godson!"

"Harry!" Remus shouted. "You're stronger than this! Don't let him control you!"

"Fools! Harry's gone!"

His cackle was like a prelude to destruction. Tom swept his hand out, wiping the vines out like they were nothing. The explosion that followed slammed into Daphne, who screamed as the headmaster shielded her. Her scream must have reached them because Tom Riddle paused. For just a second, Daphne thought she saw the yellow eyes of Tom change back into Harry's emerald color.

"Harry!" Daphne called out to him. "Harry! It's me! Come back to me! Don't let... Don't let Voldemort control you!"

Tom smirked. "Little girl. Harry is gone. I own this body now."

"You're lying!" Daphne snapped. "Harry is in there! Harry! Don't let that has been control you!"

Tom twitched. "H-has been?"

"Headmaster," Daphne said. "I need you to get me closer."

"That will be difficult, but I'll do my best," Headmaster Dumbledore said.
"Sirius! Remus!"

"I'm already ahead of you!" Sirius said as he cast several dozen spells in just as many seconds. He strung them together so quickly that Daphne had trouble counting them.

Tom countered the spells with ease, but there were so many that he couldn't attack. Sirius was like a storm. He created a never ending stream of spell, chaining them together in a ceaseless pattern. Daphne had once heard from her father that Sirius had been the most skilled duelist at Hogwarts. She could see what made him so talented.

It didn't help that Remus was also attacking. Unlike Sirius, who chained spells together like it was as natural as breathing, Remus used transfiguration. Rubble turned into snakes that tried to bite Tom's legs; spears were conjured and sent at Tom like thrown javelins; lions, birds, antelopes... everything within the room became an animal that tried to attack Tom Riddle.

While Sirius and Remus launched an offensive attack that forced Tom on the defense, Headmaster Dumbledore created large walls that rose from the ground and boxed Tom in. The man in Harry's body would move one way as if to dodge, and then he'd find himself hitting a wall. It added a new dynamic that the man couldn't seem to accommodate for.

"Now is your chance, Ms. Greengrass," Headmaster Dumbledore said.

"What?"

It wasn't until the words were spoken that Daphne realized what he meant. The obstructions, large walls that the headmaster had raised from the ground, created a path. If she used them as cover, she could reach Harry.

She took a deep breath. This was it.

"I'm on it!"

Daphne rushed out from behind the headmaster. She made it to one of

the walls and pressed her back against it. Headmaster Dumbledore was really letting loose now. She couldn't see what he was creating, but she could see his wand moving more furiously than before. Another deep breath. Daphne rushed out from behind the cover and made it to another wall. She peered around the corner. Tom hadn't noticed her. His back was turned. He was being forced to focus solely on defense as he fought against three wizards, one of which was the greatest wizard in recent history.

This was her chance.

I can do this.

She stepped out from behind the wall and lunged.

"What?!" Tom shouted as Daphne slammed into his back and wrapped her arms around his stomach.

"Come back to me, Harry! Come back! I need you!" Daphne screamed.

Tom laughed, a cackling and mad laugh that bubbled from his throat like miasma from a volcano. "Stupid girl! I told you this body is—" he paused, his body jerking. "N-no... you... I got rid of you! This is my body now! It's mine!"

"No!" another voice shouted. It was the same as before, but Daphne recognized the tone. That was definitely Harry's voice! "This body isn't yours! It's mine! I won't let you... have it!"

"Fight him, Harry!" Daphne said.

"Da-Daphne..." Harry turned his head to look at her. "I-I don't think I can hold him for very long... you have to get away..."

"I'm not going anywhere!"

"But you'll be in—"

"Who cares if I'm in danger!" Daphne interrupted. "You're more important to me than my own life! I-I need you here with me! I want you here with

me! A life without you isn't a life I want!"

"Ggg!"

Harry clenched his teeth. He flailed in her arms, but Daphne kept her grip tight.

"You'll bother this boy no more, Tom!" Headmaster Dumbledore shouted as he chanted several verses in a language that Daphne didn't know, and then pointed his wand at Harry.

A loud scream erupted from Harry's mouth. His back arched. His body spasmed. He must have been experiencing intense pain. Daphne didn't know what to do, so she did the only thing she could think of; she held onto him and refused to let go. Light engulfed his body. It was brief but brilliant. Then the light disappeared and, after a second of silence, Harry slumped backwards like dead weight.

"W-whoa!" Daphne cried as she was taken down with him. She somehow managed to land in a sitting position. Harry ended up on her lap. "Harry? Harry! Please say something!"

Harry groaned as he blinked several times. Dull emerald eyes looked at the world around them before landing on her. Maybe it was just her imagination, but those eyes seemed to get more vibrant with her in them.

"Daph..." he mumbled. "Are you okay?"

Daphne felt like crying. "You're the one who's been possessed and you're asking me if I'm okay? What kind of idiot are you?"

"I rather resent being called an idiot," he said. He closed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Daphne. I let myself get kidnapped and forced you into a dangerous situation. If only I had been more careful, then—"

"If you blame yourself for something like this, I'm never going to forgive you," Daphne said, holding him closer. "Forget about what happened. This isn't your fault. None of us could have seen this coming, so you shouldn't blame yourself." Harry looked away, but Daphne grabbed his face and forced him to keep his eyes on her. "And if you can't do

something by yourself, then you can rely on me."

"Daphne..."

She gulped before giving him a determined look. "I... I love you, Harry. I know we're young, but I don't want to use that as an excuse to not admit how I feel. I love you, and I'm not going to let you go..."

Harry opened his mouth, but he never got the chance to speak, because Daphne chose that moment to surge forward and hamper his lips... with her own.

Naturally, she had forgotten all about Sirius, Remus, and Headmaster Dumbledore—until Sirius wolf whistled at them.

"Oh, my. I hadn't realized your relationship had progressed that far," he said. "Should I get you two a room?"

Daphne jerked her face away from Harry and tossed Sirius a blushing glare, which he merely laughed off.

Headmaster Dumbledore smiled. "I believe we should leave now. There are many injured, and it would be best if we get all of them, including Mr. Potter, to the Saint Mungos."

Daphne wanted to spend more time with Harry, but, well, she wanted to spend that time with him alone. Needless to say, she wasn't going to argue.

Rousing the aurors was difficult. All of them had taken a huge beating, even Madam Bones was not without injury. She was bleeding from a head wound, and her left arm was blackened and the skin cracked.

It turned out they had not been able to fight at full strength because, much like the headmaster, none of them wanted to harm Harry's body. This had left them open to retaliation. Tom Riddle had taken advantage of that fact to beat the aurors into submission.

"I feel like someone cracked my head open with a bat," Tonks complained as she leaned on Kingsley for support.

"Ah." Harry blushed. He was leaning on Daphne. "I'm not sorry about that."

Tonks waved him off. "Nah. It's not your fault. No worries."

"I still can't believe what happened here," Charline muttered.

"No one is going to believe me when I tell them about this," Ignius agreed.

"No one will be telling anyone about what transpired here," Madam Bones scolded them both. "All of you are going to be bound by a magical oath to never speak of this moment to anyone who wasn't here. I'll make up an excuse about what happened for the Minister and the Daily Prophet. Are we clear?"

"Ma'am!" the aurors all said in unison.

XoX

The group left Slytherin's manor after that. Headmaster Dumbledore ended up performing a mass apparition once they reached the village of Elabidea. The magic required to apparate so many people drained even the headmaster, forcing him to retreat to Hogwarts after they had arrived.

Harry Potter was dropped off at Saint Mungos along with the aurors. While Madam Bones and the others were allowed to leave a day after being received, Harry was asked to stay for an extra week. Daphne had not seen Harry since he was admitted to Saint Mungos. This also meant she hadn't been able to talk to him about her kiss, which had been so rudely interrupted by Sirius.

The Daily Prophet had apparently gotten wind that Harry had been rescued, and they were currently heaping praises on the auror department, Madam Bones, and Headmaster Dumbledore. Daphne had already read several articles that stated how quick they were to respond. It seemed like whatever plan Lucius had been concocting had backfired. That said, Daphne still didn't know what Lucius had been planning, or if he'd even had a plan.

Daphne and the others had been left out of the spotlight. No one knew that they had gone to rescue Harry, and it seemed as though Madam Bones wished to keep it that way. Personally speaking, Daphne was grateful. She had no desire to be in the spotlight.

Because Defense Against the Dark Arts was without a professor, Headmaster Dumbledore had temporarily taken the position. He was... an amazing teacher. The headmaster spoke in a way that was easy to understand and put everyone at ease. He not only answered any questions asked, but he would show them practical examples—provided such examples could be given. In some ways, his instructions reminded Daphne a lot of Harry. They had similar teaching methods.

While the school had returned to a semblance of normality, Daphne and the others still chose to use the Chamber of Secrets as their meeting place, more often than not.

Daphne was sitting on the couch. There was a sheet of parchment and a quill in front of her, but she didn't touch it. All of her homework was done anyway, so all she'd be doing was revisions, and she really didn't feel like doing that at the moment.

"Daph, would you mind reading my report to make sure everything is correct?" Astoria asked.

Withholding a sigh for her sister's sake, she offered the girl a smile. "Sure."

Astoria grinned as she handed the report over. "Sorry about this. I normally get Harry to look over it, but he's not here right now."

"Don't remind me."

Daphne let her eyes scan over the report, which was on the many uses of flobberworm mucus in potions. It looked like Astoria's information was accurate enough. However, there was a lot of information that was missing.

"Flobberworms aren't just used in the Wiggensweld Potion," Daphne said after she finished reading it. "Because it's used as a thickener, they can

be added to any potion that requires a thicker viscosity."

"What are they?" asked Astoria.

"That is something you should find out on your own."

The pout on Astoria's face was adorable. The words she said were:
"Harry would have told me what they are."

"Harry isn't here," Daphne replied. "You're also lying. Harry prefers leading you to the answer instead of just giving it to you. Nice try, though."

"Tch!"

Astoria clicked her tongue as she stood up, snatched her papers, and waltzed over to the table where everyone else was sitting. Daphne leaned back in her seat. Closing her eyes, she rubbed her eyelids, which felt sore because she'd stayed up way too late last night. She blamed Tracey for wanting to spend all night gossiping.

Daphne's body shifted when an added weight caused depressions to form in the couch. Opening her eyes, she glanced at Susan, who had taken a seat on her right. The girl didn't look at her. Twiddling her thumbs, Susan's red face and shifting eyes became her most prominent features.

"Something wrong, Sue?"

Susan shook her head. "I wanted to talk to you... about Harry."

Perking up, Daphne focused more on her friend. "Have you made a decision on what you want out of your relationship with him?"

"I have," Susan said. "I've been thinking about it a lot, and I've realized that while I do love Harry... I don't want to be in polygamous relationship. I don't want that kind of relationship. If I was going to marry someone, I'd want to be the most important person in their life instead of just one of several."

A sharp jolt hit Daphne in the chest. "I-I see."

"I'm sorry." Susan looked away. "I know that's not what you wanted to hear."

Breathing out a deep sigh, Daphne gave her friend a weary smile. "It's okay... I understand that most people wouldn't want to be in that kind of relationship."

Daphne had known for years that unless she was married to the second or third son of a noble house, someone who couldn't become the head, then becoming a mistress was the most she could ask for. She'd grown up knowing this, expecting it even. On the other hand, Susan's life had been normal; the girl had been raised by a loving aunt, and there had been no expectations placed on her.

There was also the politics to think about. Susan Bones was the heiress to a Founding House. If she became a second wife, it would be like saying that the Bones were less important than the Potters. Of course, Susan wasn't the type to care about politics, but Daphne could at least see the logic behind any potential political reasons that her friend might have for not accepting her proposal.

"If you don't mind me asking, why are you willing to be in a relationship like that?" asked Susan.

Daphne debated on what she should tell Susan. Since the girl was not going to go along with her plans, she didn't know if she should entrust her reasons and objective to her friend. At the same time, even if she couldn't gain Susan as a sister through bonds of marriage, perhaps she could at least get herself an ally to help her achieve what she wanted.

"There's a lot of reasons, but if I had to name one, I'd say it's for the sake of my goals," Daphne admitted.

"Your goals?" Susan inquired.

"I want to protect Astoria from our father." Daphne glanced at her sister, who was excitedly talking to Luna, using wild gesticulations to explain whatever point she was trying to make. "In order to protect my sister, I need to gather as many allies as possible—strong allies who can stand up to my father should the time ever come."

"There's no greater alliance than one of marriage," Susan murmured.

"Exactly." Daphne smiled at her. "If Harry had multiple wives from powerful families, they could form an alliance that not even Father can go up against. As the heiress to the Founding House of Bones, your power combined with Harry's would've been enough to keep even him from trying anything. Of course, there's also the fact that I do want to continue the family name. Even if I don't like my father anymore, the Greengrass name originally belonged to my mother. Father married into the family. I suppose you could say that this name is the only tie I have left to my mother, and I would like to keep it."

Susan's face scrunched up as she struggled to follow Daphne's line of thinking. "So, in order to keep your family name, you're willing to become Harry's mistress?"

"Yes," Daphne replied. "If I became his wife, I would take his name and our children would also take his name. If I became his second wife, my second child would be able to take the Greengrass name, but I would still be Potter. By becoming his mistress, I can retain the Greengrass name, and my first born child can also inherit the family name and responsibilities therein."

Having thought about her situation long and hard, this was the conclusion that Daphne had come to, the only outcome that would allow her to gain everything she wanted. Her sister would be protected and wouldn't married off to some rich noble who would abuse her, Daphne would have allies who could help defend their freedom, and even if she wasn't his wife, she would still get to be with Harry, the boy she loved.

Daphne didn't care about what her title was. She didn't have the sort of feminine pride that would keep her from letting another woman marry the man she loved. Her father had beaten those out of her. However, even if she lacked the sort of pride that Susan had, Daphne still possessed her ambition—and she would do whatever was necessary to achieve her goal.

"I suppose I can understand where you're coming from," Susan said at last. "And I respect your decision, even if I don't agree with it."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"So..." Daphne said after a moment of silence. "Does this make us rivals?"

Susan tilted her head, appearing to think about it for a moment. "No," she said, shaking her head. "I think... I don't think I'm really suited to being by Harry's side. I love him, but... I think he's a bit too much for me to handle." Daphne felt a jolt race down her spine. She was shocked. She became more surprised when Susan smiled at her. "I think if anyone here is suited to being with Harry, it's you. That's why... I'll do whatever I can to support you."

Daphne's eyes stung, and it was with great astonishment that she realized she was crying. She did her best to wipe her eyes before the tears could fall.

"Thanks, Sue."

Susan smiled at her. "You're welcome," she said simply.

XoX

"You have to be the single most troublesome patient I have ever met, Harry. You really are. I don't think I've ever met someone who brought me so many problems."

Harry listened to Ms. Smith, his mediwitch, while sitting on the hospital bed. He'd been confined to that bed for a whole day before his mediwitch had allowed him to move around. Of course, he wasn't allowed to leave Saint Mungos, but at least they had let him wander the hospital. He'd gone to see the Longbottoms and spoke with them a few times, though they couldn't converse, and he had even visited Ginny.

The girl was staying in the hospital for the rest of the term. The staff at Saint Mungos wanted to have her remain with them in case there were repercussions for being under a long-term possession. Despite that, Ginny seemed to have been in decent cheer. It might have helped that

Harry told her that he didn't blame her for what happened.

During his stay at Saint Mungos, Ms. Smith had periodically cast numerous scans on his body, including several lunar based rituals. It was actually the rituals that were the reason for his prolonged stay. Each one scanned his body in a different way than the others. Ms. Smith had told him that they were designed to detect foreign magic, dark magic, and various other types of spellwork that had been done to him. She had just finished her last scan today.

"I know, and I do apologize for that," Harry said. "So, what's the verdict?"

"Well, you definitely have a piece of the dark lord's soul locked in your scar," Ms. Smith stated matter of factly. "I still can't believe it, but it looks like the fragment can't be removed without killing you, so we have no choice but to leave it there. At least Headmaster Dumbledore did a good job of sealing it away."

Harry grimaced at the reminder that he had a piece of Voldemort inside of his head. It wasn't a pleasant thought, but he figured that things could have been worse. Thanks to Headmaster Dumbledore, the soul fragment was sealed inside of a prison that it couldn't break out of. Unlocking the prison required a "key", and that key was with the headmaster himself. So long as Harry's mentality remained stable, the seal wouldn't break.

"Since all of the testing is done, does that mean I'll be able to leave?" asked Harry

"Yes," Ms. Smith said. "Someone is coming to pick you up some time today. Once they're here, you are free to leave."

Which meant Harry could do nothing but wait. Since that was the case, Harry focused on cataloging the events that had transpired and thinking about what he should do in case something like this happened again.

Harry had been foolish; it had been his complacency that had allowed him to be kidnapped. Had he been more attentive, it wouldn't have happened. He also shouldn't have let Ginny Weasley get so close to him. It should have been obvious that she was the source of the trouble. She'd been possessed last year, so logically, she should have been one of his

prime suspects. The fact that the thought hadn't even crossed his mind was shameful.

At least I don't need to worry about Ginny being possessed again.

Ms. Smith had scanned Ginny herself and pronounced the girl clean. Harry trusted her judgement. If she said that there was no longer a dark lord inhabiting the girl's body, then it meant there was no dark lord.

A wandering medi-nurse eventually walked into his room. "Mr. Potter, your godfather is here to pick you up."

Harry left the hospital room and walked into the waiting room. Sirius was there, in the center of the room, wearing his usual grin.

"Harry!" he cheered, pulling him into a strong hug. "Glad to see you're fully mended!"

Awkwardly returning the hug, Harry said, "I don't know if I'd call myself mended, but I'm not a cripple, at least."

"Gotta be thankful for the little things." Sirius stepped back and grinned him. "Anyway, I'm here to escort you to Hogwarts."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Harry asked.

He walked beside Sirius as they exited Saint Mungos. Sirius then placed a hand on Harry's shoulder, and, with a soft crack, the two apparated away.

XoX

The end of the year involved exams as always. Harry wasn't worried about his results. Even though the last fourth of his school year had been hectic and filled with danger, he was positive that he had passed with flying colors. In fact, he wouldn't have been surprised if he was still at the top of his class.

Of more concern to Harry was his relationship with Daphne—specifically the kiss she had given him after saving him from being controlled by Tom

Riddle aka Voldemort. He could have played the ignorant card. He could have tried to pretend that she'd just kissed him in the heat of the moment. That would have been the rational thing to do... but it wouldn't have been right.

Daphne's kiss had been a heartfelt expression of her feelings. Harry had known about them for a while now. He wasn't foolish enough to believe that the constant hand holding and closeness was because she had familial feelings for him. This girl wasn't Lisa Crawft. They didn't have the almost family-like connection.

He didn't know what to do, or even what he wanted to do. Two options lay before him, but he didn't know which one to pick, which choice was correct, or even what choice he wanted to be correct. His mind was a jumbled mass of confusion. Part of him wanted to accept Daphne, to respond to her feelings. Yet he couldn't tell if that part of him was genuine or just hormones.

This would be so much easier if puberty didn't exist.

The problem with going through puberty was that Harry still felt, well, horny a lot more than he'd have liked. His mind was still plagued by dreams of himself with Daphne, Susan, Lisa, or any number of females that his perfect memory could call up. That was the problem. His body was so overflowing with hormones that even Lisa Crawft, the girl he loved like a sister, had not been spared from his erotic dreams. How could he trust his heart when his body constantly wanted to do something lascivious to the girls around him?

To her credit, Daphne acted as if nothing had happened between them. He didn't know if she was pretending or if there was another reason. Even so, he was grateful. It gave him some space to think, and he had more than enough on his mind that needed thinking about.

Issues with Daphne and his own feelings aside, the last few days of school were pleasant. Harry spent most of his time relaxing with his friends. They would go out to the Black Lake and have picnics, or spend time in the Chamber of Secrets and play games.

Neville had become Harry's exercise and sparring partner. His fellow

Gryffindor loved the weights, and since they were both keen on getting the most out of them, they had become each other's spotter. He also played chess with Blaize, Terry, and Lisa. It was wizard's chess. Harry still didn't understand the need for the pieces to destroy each other, but he supposed he wasn't meant to understand.

He'd also taken to broom racing with Tracey, who used every opportunity she could to make him race around the track with her. He always won. However, that only seemed to inspire her to try harder. Apparently, she wasn't a fan of losing when it came to anything that dealt with brooms.

Perhaps the most surprising person he interacted with was Susan. Before now he kept getting mixed signals from her. Sometimes it seemed like she wanted to be closer to him, and other times he felt like she was avoiding him. After he returned from the hospital, she had greeted him with a smile and spoke with an easiness that had not been present before. Gone was the awkward feelings between them. She spoke to him freely and without hesitation. He liked this change.

During the last day of school, Harry headed down to the Great Hall with Neville and Astoria and met up with the others. Most of the conversation taking place around them was about the finals. It was nice to see that Hogwarts had returned to a sense of normality, though some things would never be the same again.

Several students had been pulled out of Hogwarts. There were a number of concerned parents who no longer wanted their child to learn from this institute, and the problem was that no one could blame them. With all that had happened, it only made sense. Of course, only ten students had been pulled, but in a school that only boasted about 200 people, ten was still a lot.

As always, the headmaster gave a closing speech after everyone had their fill of food.

"The end of the year is usually a time of joy. Summer means being able to relax and unlearn all of the things you've learned. Sadly, even though this year should have been a time where students are anticipating the fun they can have over the summer holidays, this year has been marked by

tragedy."

A somberness entered the Great Hall. Some students stifled sobs. They were probably friends of the people who'd been killed.

"We will never forget the people who were killed during the unmitigated attack on Hogsmeade. Such tragedies always leave their scars, and even if time heals all wounds, they cannot erase them. I wanted to take this time to apologize for not being able to stop these events from taking place. Had I been more diligent, perhaps those students who lost their lives would still be with us."

His words caused a stirring among the students; their shock was nearly palpable. It was not often that the headmaster apologized for failing. Even Harry felt a moment of surprise.

"I plan to become more diligent in the future," Headmaster Dumbledore continued. "To that end, I plan on quitting my role as the Supreme Mugwump for the International Confederation of Wizards."

Shocked gasped echoed across the Great Hall. Even the teachers were staring at the headmaster like he'd suddenly transformed into a cerberus.

"I believe I have been stretching myself too thin," the headmaster admitted. "I've tried for so long to help maintain peace within our world that I've taken everything onto my shoulders. It was a mistake. One man cannot do everything alone. This past year has proven that, and so, this summer, I'll be handing in my resignation. I hope that in doing so, I can focus on becoming a better headmaster to all of you."

Headmaster Dumbledore's speech ended on that shocking note. The stunned students were lead out of the Great Hall, boarded their carriages, and were taken down to where the Hogwarts Express was waiting.

Harry boarded the train with the others, locating an empty compartment that all eleven of them piled into. It didn't come as a surprise when he found himself right next to Daphne. While this hadn't bothered him much before, he was now distinctly aware of her presence. It was all because of that kiss.

"What did you all think of the headmaster's speech?" asked Tracey as the train started moving.

"You mean his statement about resigning as the Supreme Mugwump?" Hannah asked.

"Yeah, that."

"It's a bold move," Blaize said. "But, when you really think about it, his decision makes sense."

"How so?" asked Lisa.

"Because the headmaster is getting up there in years," Daphne replied. "When he was younger, he could juggle three positions at once, but it's clear to those who've been watching him that he's not what he used to be. I think the headmaster is beginning to realize that as well."

"Age is an enemy that not even powerful wizards can battle," Harry said. Then he paused. "Well, unless they make a Philosopher's Stone, but I doubt many people know how to create one of those."

Everyone accepted that explanation, and the conversation soon changed from Headmaster Dumbledore to what everyone was doing for the summer. Of course, in bringing up the summer holidays, they couldn't avoid the topic of the Quidditch World Cup.

"The Quidditch World Cup hasn't been held in Britain for five years," Tracey was saying. "It's going to be amazing! I bet you anything that the teams playing are going to be Bulgaria and Ireland."

Terry sighed. "For once I agree with you. Bulgaria has Victor Krum, and Ireland is known for having the greatest offense this season. Too bad I won't be able to see it."

"Why not?" asked Harry.

"Because tickets are expensive," Terry said, shrugging. "A single ticket cost more galleons than most people can fork over—unless they're willing to accept gutter seats, but no one wants those."

"I could get us tickets," Harry said.

"What? Really?" asked Tracey, leaning forward and pinning him with a stare.

Harry shrugged. "Sure. We could even make this a group thing. What do you guys think?"

"I've got no complaints," Terry said.

"I'm not a big Quidditch fan, but going somewhere together seems like it could be fun," Hannah admitted.

After everyone had given their assent about planning to visit the Quidditch World Cup, everyone broke off into their own conversations. Only Harry didn't join in. Not that this was anything new. Everyone had grown used to him occasionally growing quiet. He did it so often that they sometimes teased him about it.

Yet Harry's reason for being quiet was not because he was contemplating something deep. He simply couldn't think of anything to say. Daphne was sitting next to him. They were so close he could feel her thighs touching him through their robes. Her scent, a mixture of vanilla and something else, tickled his nose.

I still don't know what to do.

Harry had spent years actively avoiding romance whenever he could. Lisa talked about it so much in their youth that he'd grown absolutely sick of any mention of romantic things like dates and kisses. It had gotten even worse after puberty. His body began to conflict with his mind. Desire and rationality clashed in a never ending battle. Having avoided even the concept of romance for so long, Harry didn't know what to do now that some part of him craved it—or at least the physical aspect of romance.

This is too much.

Magic flowed through his body. He'd been born with strong magic. Perhaps it was because of that, but Harry's hormones often felt like they were raging out of control. While he'd gotten a grip on them thanks to his

occlumency, the truth was that they were always lurking below the surface. He merely pushed them back.

Harry glanced at Daphne.

She doesn't deserve this...

Daphne deserved a decisive answer; how could he do any less after everything she'd done to let him know about her feelings?

I need to answer her...

Yes, he would give her an answer. He didn't know what his answer would be, but Harry promised himself that he would give her an answer.

She deserves it.

XoX

Everyone exited the train after it pulled into Platform nine and three-quarters. The first person to greet them was an enthusiastic Sirius, who wore the broadest grin Harry had ever seen. He wasn't alone. Standing beside him, or rather, behind him were several parents of his friends: the Davis, the Abbots, and Madam Bones. They were only a few steps behind Sirius, who engulfed Harry in a hug that felt like it had cracked a few ribs.

"Harry! It's good to see you! It's been too long!"

"It's... only been a few weeks," Harry grunted.

"That might as well be forever!"

"Whatever. I'm here now, so just put me down. I think you're breaking something."

Sirius did as he was asked, but not until he finished swinging Harry around a few more times. With his back groaning in protest, Harry turned to watch as his friends were greeted by their parents. Tracey was being teased by her mum about something. It sounded like they were teasing

her about Terry, which had caused both hers and Terry's faces to turn an unusual shade of puke green. Hannah and Susan's greetings were much more calm.

Harry walked up to the group and exchanged greetings.

"It's good to see all of you. I'm glad you're doing well."

"Harry." Madam Bones smiled at him. It made her face appear less stern, despite how she was still wearing her monocle. "It's good to see you, too. It looks like you've recovered from your ordeal."

"More or less." Harry shrugged.

"I heard about how you were kidnapped," Mrs. Davis said. "I'm really glad you're okay."

"Me too. I don't know what would have happened if Madam Bones and the headmaster hadn't rescued me."

"It was a dangerous situation," Madam Bones agreed.

No one knew what had really transpired. All of the auror had been bound to a magical oath. They couldn't tell a soul, and Madam Bones had made up a story about a psychopath using Ginny to kidnap him. Everyone had bought it. Since there was no way to confirm if it was true or not, everyone had been forced to accept her explanation.

"Well, we're in a hurry," Mrs. Abbott said. "So we'll be leaving now. You guys take care."

"Good bye." Mr. Abbott waved at them.

"I'll see you guys later!" Hannah waved as she left with her parents.

"We should be leaving soon, too," Madam Bones said to Susan.

"Right." Nodding, Susan said her goodbyes to everyone there. Harry was shocked when she gave Daphne a big hug, but then she left them all with a smile on her face.

"Oh, my. Harry," a voice said from behind them.

Harry turned—and found himself plowing face first into a pair of boobs. He blinked several times. Then he looked up, into the smiling face of Celestina.

This would have been the moment where he jerked himself away, but he was several seconds too slow. Celestina wrapped her arms around him in a tender hug. He wondered if she was trying to be motherly. It didn't feel very motherly, but that might have had something to do with the stiffness in his pants.

Stupid hormones... Stupid. Stupid. Stupid hormones.

"I heard about what happened from Blaize," Celestina said. "You really should learn to be more careful, Harry." She leaned down and whispered into his ear. "Everyone who is allied to you was really worried when we learned about what happened. Even the old hag put aside her dislike of me to help search for you."

"I-is that so?" Harry mumbled, trying to control his breathing. This wasn't the time to be aroused by a beautiful older woman. "I'll be more careful."

"That's all I ask."

"I sometimes feel like Mum loves you more than she loves me," Blaize mumbled.

"Now that's not true at all, Blaize." Celestina smiled, showing her perfect ivory teeth. "I love you very much, but you never let me hug you like Harry does."

Blaize turned his head. "That's because it's embarrassing."

"You're so cute," his mother teased.

Blaize and Celestina soon left. Celestina said it was because she "*didn't want to get into an argument with the old hag*," which he believed meant she didn't want to see Neville's grandmother. Sirius tried to talk her to some, but he couldn't get away from Astoria, who apparently didn't want

him talking to anyone else.

It was probably a good thing that Blaize and Celestina left, because the Dowager Longbottom arrived several minutes later. She took a long, hard look at Harry, as though confirming for herself that he was fine. Then she nodded.

"You should be more careful. All of us were worried. Even that promiscuous wench was willing to set aside her difference to work with me."

Harry didn't know what was more amusing: the fact that Celestina had said the exact same thing, or the fact that neither of them seemed to realize how similar they were. He wondered what that meant. He'd once heard a quote about "birds of a feather," but these two were the antithesis of that.

Terry's and Lisa's parents came next. He gave them his greetings and said goodbye to his friends, promising to write to them during the summer. Luna's father came after that. It was quite the first meeting.

"Hello! You must be Harry Potter. My daughter has told me a lot about you."

Xenophilius Lovegood had the most eccentric appearance Harry had ever seen. Slightly cross-eyed, with shoulder-length white hair the same texture as dental floss, he wore a cap with a tassel hanging down the front, and his robes were the strangest shade of yellow. Upon their greeting, the man enthusiastically pumped Harry's hand.

"Is that so?" Harry asked.

"Oh, yes. She has mentioned all of the problems you've been having." The man leaned in and whispered. "Between you and me, I believe your problem stems from the Rotfang Conspiracy that the Ministry is hiding, but don't you worry. I'll find out everything soon. They cannot contain the truth forever!"

"Right..."

"He's an odd man, isn't he?" Daphne asked as she stood beside him. Xenophilia had just left with Luna, who had given him, Daphne, and Astoria a big hug. Astoria, meanwhile, was still talking poor Sirius's ear off.

That sort of crush cannot be healthy.

"He is, but I don't think that's a bad thing," Harry said.

"Me neither."

"Listen, Daphne," Harry started again, "I wanted to ask... if you could give me a bit of time."

Daphne furrowed her brow. "Time?"

Harry turned away. He could feel his cheeks turning red. "I... want to tell you how I feel... for you. The problem is that I don't really know how I feel. That's why... would you mind waiting for just a little while longer? Next year, I promise I'll let you know how I feel."

The stare that Daphne gave Harry made him feel naked. It was like she was piercing his skin and staring into his soul. He was fortunate that the look only lasted for a few seconds before it was replaced with a smile.

"Has Astoria been pressuring you lately?" she asked.

Harry shook his head. "No... I've been thinking about this since you kissed me. I... well, I really liked it, but at the same time, I don't know my own feelings. I've... I mean, I've always done my best to avoid romantic entanglements, so..."

"I understand," Daphne said. "Give me an answer when you're ready. I'll be waiting."

The relief Harry felt in that moment was immeasurable. It was like a world's worth of weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "Thanks, Daph."

"You're welcome," she said simply.

Nathaniel Greengrass soon arrived to pick Daphne and Astoria up. While Astoria seemed reluctant to leave, Daphne tenderly held her sister's hand and soothed the girl as they departed.

Harry watched them go. He hoped they would be okay. He didn't think Nathaniel would do anything to them, not until he could counter Celestina's blackmail, but he didn't feel comfortable leaving them with their father.

I suppose there's nothing I can do about that.

"What were you and Daphne talking about?" asked Sirius.

"Nothing," Harry said softly. "Nothing at all. Let's go home."

"Sure."

As they made their way out of platform nine and three-quarters, Harry thought about all of the things he had to do this summer. There was so much that needed to get done. Several of the plans that he had made would be coming to fruition this summer.

Harry smiled. Change was coming. He hoped the wizarding world was ready for it.

"That is the creepiest smile I've ever seen," Sirius remarked as he stared at his face.

"S-shut up!" Harry snapped. His blush would not be leaving anytime soon.

Fin.

I have several announcements to make before I leave you.

First: Susan. I still don't know if she'll be a part of Harry's harem. However, at this point in time, I do not think she's ready. Unlike Daphne, who grew up accepting that she was going to become someone's mistress, Susan is a normal girl. She was raised by a

loving aunt and not a douchebag father. Amelia Bones is also a very progressive thinker, so Susan would be the same. Because of that, I do not believe that Susan is emotionally or mentally ready for a polygamous relationship.

Second: I will not be working on the fourth Harry Potter book, which I have yet to name, for a while. The reason is because I plan on finishing all of my current fan fictions before starting anything new. If you'd like to know what I'm working on, then be sure to follow me on twitter. My profile name is BrandonBVarrell.

Third: If you like my writing and would like to support me, I'd be very happy if you pre-ordered my latest book. Succubus is an urban fantasy series that I was inspired to write after reading the entire Dresden Files series by Jim Butcher. It's also my only non-anime-inspired piece of fiction. You can pre-order a copy at Amazon or Barnes and Noble in hardcover, paperback, and ebook. The book is also being sold on Itunes and Kobo.

Succubus synopsis:

Christian is the Catholic Church's best executioner. Dedicated. Devout. Deadly. Ever since the Church saved him from the decimated ruins of his hometown, his commitment to their cause has been unshakable.

Then he's sent to execute Lilith, who lives in Seal Beach, California. He's baffled. Lilith is afraid of men. The Church believes she's a succubus, but he just can't see it. Yet the way men—both human and monster alike—act as if they've been possessed whenever she's near is disturbing.

With lustful men attacking Lilith and monsters attacking him for being near Lilith, Christian must uncover what's really going on, and soon, or innocent blood will run through the streets—as will his own.

Love. It can kill a man.

Once again, thank you all for reading my story. I hope you had fun.

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